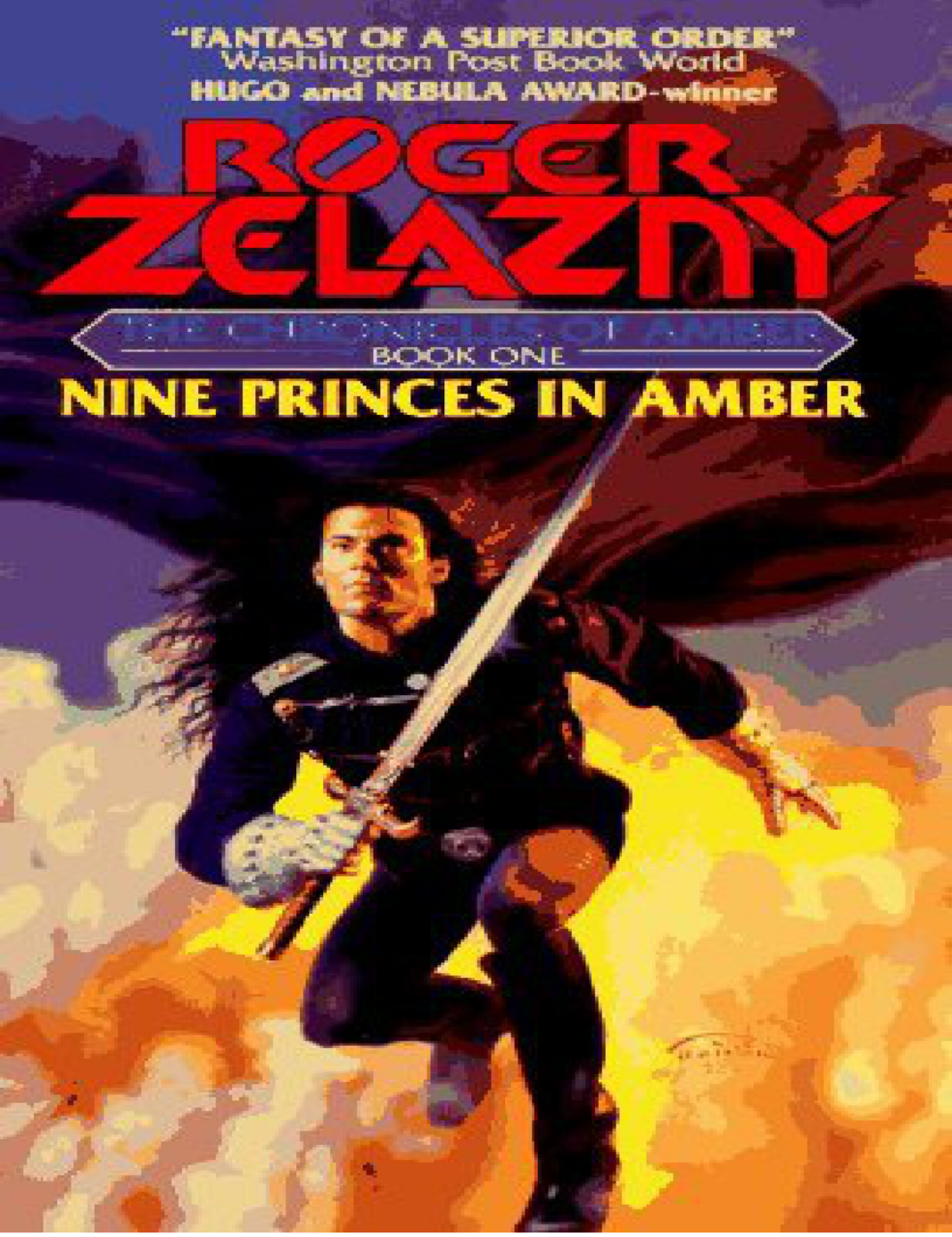
"FANTASY OF A SUPERIOR ORDER"
Washington Post Book World
HUGO and NEBULA AWARD-winner
ROGER ZELAZNY
THE CHRONICLES OF AMBER
BOOK ONE
NINE PRINCES IN AMBER

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Chapter 1

It was starting to end, after what seemed most of eternity to me.

I attempted to wriggle my toes, succeeded. I was sprawled there in a hospital bed and my legs were done up in plaster casts, but they were still mine.

I squeezed my eyes shut, and opened them, three times.

The room grew steady.

Where the hell was I?

Then the fogs were slowly broken, and some of that which is called memory returned to me. I recalled nights and nurses and needles. Every time things would begin to clear a bit, someone would come in and jab me with something. That's how it had been. Yes. Now, though, I was feeling halfway decent. They'd have to stop.

Wouldn't they?

The thought came to assail me: Maybe not.

Some natural skepticism as to the purity of all human motives came and sat upon my chest. I'd been over narcotized, I suddenly knew. No real reason for it, from the way I felt, and no reason for them to stop now, if they'd been paid to keep it up. So play it cool and stay dopey, said a voice which was my worst, if wiser, self.

So I did.

A nurse poked her head in the door about ten minutes later, and I was, of course, still sacking Z's. She went away.

By then, I'd reconstructed a bit of what had occurred

I had been in some sort of accident, I remembered vaguely. What had happened after that was still a blur; and as to what had happened before, I had no inkling whatsoever. But I had first been in a hospital and then brought to this place, I remembered. Why? I didn't know.

However, my legs felt pretty good. Good enough to hold me up, though I didn't know how much time had lapsed since their breaking —and I knew they'd been broken.

So I sat up. It took me a real effort, as my muscles were very tired. It was dark outside and a handful of stars were standing naked beyond the window. I winked back at them and threw my legs over the edge of the bed.

I was dizzy, but after a while it subsided and I got up, gripping the rail at the head of the bed, and I took my first step.

Okay. My legs held me.

So, theoretically, I was in good enough shape to walk out.

I made it back to the bed, stretched out and thought. I was sweating and shaking. Visions of sugarplums, *etc.*

In the State of Denmark there was the odor of decay...

It had been an accident involving an auto, I recalled. One helluva one....

Then the door opened, letting in light, and through slits beneath my eyelashes I saw a nurse with a hypo in her hand.

She approached my bedside, a hippy broad with dark hair and big arms.

Just as she neared, I sat up.

"Good evening," I said.

"Why-good evening," she replied.

"When do I check out?" I asked.

"I'll have to ask Doctor."

"Do so," I said.

"Please roll up your sleeve."

"No thanks."

"I have to give you an injection"

"No you don't. I don't need it"

"I'm afraid that's for Doctor to say."

"Then send him around and let him say it. But in the meantime, I will not permit it."

"I'm afraid I have my orders."

"So did Eichmann, and look what happened to him," and I shook my head slowly.

"Very well," she said. "I'll have to report this...

"Please do," I said, "and while you're at it, tell him I've decided to check out in the morning."

"That's impossible. You can't even walk—and there were internal injuries...."

"We'll see," said I. "Good night"

She swished out of sight without answering.

So I lay there and mulled. It seemed I was in some sort of private place—so somebody was footing the bill. Whom did I know? No visions of relatives appeared behind my eyes. Friends either. What did that leave? Enemies?

I thought a while.

Nothing.

Nobody to benefact me thus.

I'd gone over a cliff in my car, and into a lake, I suddenly remembered. And that was all I remembered.

I was...

I strained and began to sweat again.

I didn't know who I was.

But to occupy myself, I sat up and stripped away all my bandages. I seemed all right underneath them, and it seemed the right thing to do. I broke the cast on my right leg, using a metal strut I'd removed

from the head of the bed. I had a sudden feeling that I had to get out in a hurry, that there was something I had to do.

I tested my right leg. It was okay.

I shattered the cast on my left leg, got up, went to the closet.

No clothes there.

Then I heard the footsteps. I returned to my bed and covered over the broken casts and the discarded bandages.

The door swung inward once again.

Then there was light all around me, and there was a beefy guy in a white jacket standing with his hand on the wall switch.

"What's this I hear about you giving the nurse a hard time?" he asked, and there was no more feigning sleep.

"I don't know," I said. "What is it?"

That troubled him for a second or two, said the frown then, "It's time for your shot."

"Are you an M.D.?" I asked.

"No, but I'm authorized to give you a shot"

"And I refuse it'" I said, "as I've a legal right to do. What's it to you?"

"You'll have your shot," he said, and he moved around to the left side of the bed. He had a hypo in one hand which bad been out of sight till then.

It was a very foul blow, about four inches below the belt buckle, I'd say, and it left him on his knees.

"___ ___!" he said, after a time.

"Come within spitting distance again," I said, "and see what happens."

"We've got ways to deal with patients like you," he gasped.

So I knew the time had come to act.

"Where are my clothes?" I said.

"___ ___!" he repeated

"Then I guess I'll have to take yours. Give them to me."

It became boring with the third repetition, so I threw the bedclothes over his head and clobbered him with the metal strut.

Within two minutes, I'd say, I was garbed all in the color of Moby Dick and vanilla ice cream. Ugly.

I shoved him into the closet and looked out the lattice window. I saw the Old Moon with the New Moon in her arms, hovering above a row of poplars. The grass was silvery and sparkled. The night was bargaining weakly with the sun. Nothing to show, for me, where this place was located. I seemed to be on the third floor of the building though, and there was a cast square of light off to my left and low, seeming to indicate a first floor window with someone awake behind it.

So I left the room and considered the hallway. Off to the left, it ended against a wall with a latticed window, and there were four more doors, two on either side. Probably they let upon more doors like my own. I went and looked out the window and saw more grounds, more trees, more night, nothing new. Turning, I headed in the other direction.

Doors, doors, doors, no lights from under any of them, the only sounds my footsteps from the too big borrowed shoes.

Laughing Boy's wristwatch told me it was five forty-four. The metal strut was inside my belt, under the white orderly jacket, and it rubbed against my hip bone as I walked. There was a ceiling fixture about every twenty feet, casting about forty watts of light.

I came to a stairway, off to the right, leading down. I took it. It was carpeted and quiet.

The second floor looked like my own, rows of rooms, so I continued on.

When I reached the first floor I turned right, looking for the door with light leaking out from beneath it.

I found it, way up near the end of the corridor, and I didn't bother to knock.

The guy was sitting there in a garish bathrobe, at a big shiny desk, going over some sort of ledger. This was no ward room. He looked up at me with burning eyes all wide and lips swelling toward a yell they didn't reach, perhaps because of my determined expression. He stood, quickly.

I shut the door behind me, advanced, and said:

"Good morning. You're in trouble."

People must always be curious as to trouble, because after the three seconds it took me to cross the room, his words were:

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," I said, "that you're about to suffer a lawsuit for holding me incommunicado, and another one for malpractice, for your indiscriminate use of narcotics. I'm already suffering withdrawal symptoms and might do something violent...."

He stood up.

"Get out of here," he said.

I saw a pack of cigarettes on his desk. I helped myself and said, "Sit down and shut up. We've got things to talk about."

He sat down, but he didn't shut up:

"You're breaking several regulations," he said.

"So we'll let a court decide who's liable," I replied. "I want my clothes and my personal effects. I'm checking out."

"You're in no condition-"

"Nobody asked you. Pony up this minute, or answer to the law."

He reached toward a button on his desk, but I slapped his hand away.

"Now!" I repeated. "You should have pressed that when I came in. It's too late now."

"Mr. Corey, you're being most difficult.

Corey?

"I didn't check me in here," I said, "but I damn well have a right to check me out. And now's the time. So let's get about it."

"Obviously, you're in no condition to leave this institution," he replied. "I cannot permit it I am going to call for someone to escort you back to your room and put you to bed."

"Don't try it," I said, "or you'll find out what condition I'm in. Now, I've several questions. The first one's who checked me in, and who's footing my bill at this place?"

"Very well," he sighed, and his tiny, sandy mustaches sagged as low as they could.

He opened a drawer, put his hand inside, and I was wary.

I knocked it down before he had the safety catch off: a .32 automatic, very neat; Colt. I snapped the catch myself when I retrieved it from the desktop; and I pointed it and said: "You will answer my questions. Obviously you consider me dangerous. You may be right."

He smiled weakly, lit a cigarette himself, which was a mistake, if he intended to indicate aplomb. His hands shook.

"All right, Corey-if it will make you happy," he said, "your sister checked you in"

"?" thought I.

"Which sister?" I asked.

"Evelyn," he said.

No bells. So, "That's ridiculous. I haven't seen Evelyn in years," I said. "She didn't even know I was in this part of the country."

He shrugged.

"Nevertheless&hellip"

"Where's she staying now? I want to call her," I said.

"I don't have her address handy."

"Get it."

He rose, crossed to a filing cabinet, opened it, riffled, withdrew a card.

I studied it. Mrs. Evelyn Flaumel...The New York address was not familiar either but I committed it to memory. As the card said, my first name was Carl. Good. More data.

I stuck the gun in my belt beside the strut then, safety back on, of course.

"Okay," I told him. "Where are my clothes, and what're you going

to pay me?"

"Your clothes were destroyed in the accident," he said, "and I must tell you that your legs were definitely broken-the left one in two places. Frankly, I can't see how you're managing to stay on your feet. It's only been two weeks-"

"I always heal fast," I said. "Now, about the money..."

"What money?"

"The out-of-court settlement for my malpractice complaint and the other one."

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Who's being ridiculous? I'll settle for a thousand, cash, right now."

"I won't even discuss such a thing."

"Well, you'd better consider it—and win or lose, think about the name it will give this place if I manage enough pretrial publicity. I'll certainly get in touch with the AMA, the newspapers, the-"

"Blackmail," he said, "and I'll have nothing to do with it."

"Pay now, or pay later, after a court order," I said. "I don't care. But it'll be cheaper this way."

If he came across, I'd know my guesses were right and there was something crooked involved.

He glared at me, I don't know how long.

Finally, "I haven't got a thousand here," he said.

"Name a compromise figure," I said.

After another pause, "It's larceny."

"Not if it's cash-and-carry, Charlie. So, call it."

"I might have five hundred in my safe."

"Get it."

He told me, after inspecting the contents of a small wall safe, there was four-thirty, and I didn't want to leave fingerprints on the safe just to check him out. So I accepted and stuffed the bills into my side pocket.

"Now what's the nearest cab company that serves this place?"

He named it, and I checked in the phone book, which told me I was upstate.

I made him dial it and call me a cab, because I didn't know the name of the place and didn't want him to know the condition of my memory. One of the bandages I had removed had been around my head.

While he was making the arrangement I heard him name the place: it was called Greenwood Private Hospital.

I snubbed out my cigarette, picked up another, and removed perhaps two hundred pounds from my feet by resting in a brown upholstered chair beside his bookcase.

"We wait here and you'll see me to the door," I said.
I never heard another word out of him.

Chapter 2

It was about eight o'clock when the cab deposited me on a random corner in the nearest town. I paid off the driver and walked for around twenty minutes. Then I stopped in a diner, found a booth and had juice, a couple of eggs, toast, bacon and three cups of coffee. The bacon was too greasy.

After giving breakfast a good hour, I started walking, found a clothing store, and waited till its nine-thirty opening.

I bought a pair of slacks, three sport shirts, a belt, some underwear, and a pair of shoes that fit. I also picked up a handkerchief, a wallet, and pocket comb.

Then I found a Greyhound station and boarded a bus for New York. No one tried to stop me. No one seemed to be looking for me.

Sitting there, watching the countryside all autumn-colored and tickled by brisk winds beneath a bright, cold sky, I reviewed everything I knew about myself and my circumstances.

I had been registered at Greenwood as Carl Corey by my sister Evelyn Flaumel. This had been subsequent to an auto accident some fifteen or so days past, in which I had suffered broken bones which no longer troubled me. I didn't remember Sister Evelyn. The Greenwood people had been instructed to keep me passive, were afraid of the law when I got loose and threatened them with it. Okay. Someone was afraid of me, for some reason. I'd play it for all it was worth.

I forced my mind back to the accident, dwelled upon it till my head hurt. It was no accident. I had that impression, though I didn't know why. I would find out, and someone would pay. Very, very much would they pay. An anger, a terrible one, flared within the middle of my body. Anyone who tried to hurt me, to use me, did so at his own peril and now he would receive his due, whoever he was, this one. I felt a strong desire to kill, to destroy whoever had been responsible, and I knew that it was not the first time in my life that I had felt this thing, and I knew, too, that I had followed through on it in the past. More than once.

I stared out the window, watching the dead leaves fall.

When I hit the Big City, the first thing I did was to get a shave and haircut in the nearest clip joint, and the second was to change my shirt and undershirt in the men's room, because I can't stand hair down my back. The .32 automatic, belonging to the nameless individual at Greenwood, was in my right-hand jacket pocket. I suppose that if Greenwood or my sister wanted me picked up in a hurry, a Sullivan violation would come in handy. But I decided to hang onto it. They'd have to find me first, and I wanted a reason. I ate

a quick lunch, rode subways and buses for an hour, then got a cab to take me out to the Westchester address of Evelyn, my nominal sister and hopeful jogger of memories.

Before I arrived, I'd already decided on the tack I'd take.

So, when the door to the huge old place opened in response to my knock, after about a thirty-second wait, I knew what I was going to say. I had thought about it as I'd walked up the long, winding, white gravel driveway, between the dark oaks and the bright maples, leaves crunching beneath my feet, and the wind cold on my fresh-scraped neck within the raised collar of my jacket. The smell of my hair tonic mingled with a musty odor from the ropes of ivy that crowded all over the walls of that old, brick place. There was no sense of familiarity. I didn't think I had ever been here before.

I had knocked, and there had come an echo.

Then I'd jammed my hands into my pockets and waited.

When the door opened, I had smiled and nodded toward the mole-flecked maid with a swarthy complexion and a Puerto Rican accent.

"Yes?" she said,

"I'd like to see Mrs. Evelyn Flaumel, please."

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Her brother Carl."

"Oh come in please," she told me.

I entered a hallway, the floor a mosaic of tiny salmon and turquoise tiles, the wall mahogany, a trough of big-leafed green things occupying a room divider to my left. From overhead, a cube of glass and enamel threw down a yellow light.

The gal departed, and I sought around me for something familiar.

Nothing.

So I waited.

Presently, the maid returned, smiled, nodded, and said, "Please follow me. She will see you in the library."

I followed, up three stairs and down a corridor past two closed doors, The third one to my left was open, and the maid indicated I should enter it. I did so, then paused on the threshold.

Like all libraries, it was full of books. It also held three paintings, two indicating quiet landscapes and one a peaceful seascape. The floor was heavily carpeted in green. There was a big globe beside the big desk with Africa facing me and a wall-to-wall window behind it, eight stepladders of glass. But none of these was the reason I'd paused.

The woman behind the desk wore a wide-collared, V-necked dress of blue-green, had long hair and low bangs, all of a cross between sunset clouds and the outer edge of a candle flame in an otherwise dark room, and natural, I somehow knew, and her eyes behind glasses

I didn't think she needed were as blue as Lake Erie at three o'clock on a cloudless summer afternoon; and the color of her compressed smile matched her hair. But none of these was the reason I'd paused.

I knew her, from somewhere, though I couldn't say where.

I advanced, holding my own smile.

"Hello," I said.

"Sit down," said she, "please," indicating a high-backed, big-armed chair that bulged and was orange, of the kind just tilted at the angle in which I loved to loaf.

I did so, and she studied me.

"Glad to see you're up and around again."

"Me, too. How've you been?"

"Fine, thank you. I must say I didn't expect to see you here."

"I know," I fibbed, "but here I am, to thank you for your sisterly kindness and care." I let a slight note of irony sound within the sentence just to observe her response.

At that point an enormous dog entered the room-an Irish wolfhound-and it curled up in front of the desk. Another followed and circled the globe twice before lying down.

"Well," said she, returning the irony, "it was the least I could do for you. You should drive more carefully."

"In the future," I said, "I'll take greater precautions, I promise." I didn't now what sort of game I was playing, but since she didn't know that I didn't know, I'd decided to take her for all the information I could. "I figured you would be curious as to the shape I was in, so I came to let you see."

"I was, am," she replied. "Have you eaten?"

"A light lunch, several hours ago." I said.

So she rang up the maid and ordered food. Then "I thought you might take it upon yourself to leave Greenwood," she said, "when you were able, I didn't think it would be so soon, though, and I didn't think you'd come here."

"I know," I said, "that's why I did."

She offered me a cigarette and I took it, lit hers, lit mine.

"You always were unpredictable," she finally told me. "While this has helped you often in the past, however, I wouldn't count on it now."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"The stakes are far too high for a bluff, and I think that's what you're trying, walking in here like this. I've always admired your courage, Corwin, but don't be a fool. You know the score."

Corwin? File it away, under "Corey."

"Maybe I don't," I said. "I've been asleep for a while, remember?"

"You mean you haven't been in touch?"

"Haven't had a chance, since I woke up."

She leaned her head to one side and narrowed her wonderful eyes.

"Rash," she said, "but possible. Just possible. You might mean it. You might. I'll pretend that you do, for now. In that case, you may have done a smart safe thing. Let me think about it."

I drew on my cigarette, hoping she'd say something more. But she didn't, so I decided to seize what seemed the advantage I'd obtained in this game I didn't understand with players I didn't know for stakes I had no inkling of.

"The fact that I'm here indicates something," I said.

"Yes," she replied, "I know. But you're smart, so it could indicate more than one thing. We'll wait and see."

Wait for what? See what? Thing?

Steaks then arrived and a pitcher of beer, so I was temporarily freed from the necessity of making cryptic and general statements for her to ponder as subtle or cagey. Mine was a good steak, pink inside and full of juice, and I tore at the fresh tough-crested bread with my teeth and gulped the beer with a great hunger and a thirst. She laughed as she watched me, while cutting off tiny pieces of her own.

"I love the gusto with which you assail life, Corwin. It's one of the reasons I'd hate to see you part company with it."

"Me, too," I muttered.

And while I ate, I pondered her. I saw her in a low-cut gown, green as the green of the sea, with full skirts. There was music, dancing, voices behind us. I wore black and silver and . . . The vision faded. But it was a true piece of my memory, I knew; and inwardly I cursed that I lacked it in its entirety. What had she been saying, in her green, to me in my black and silver, that night, behind the music, the dancing and the voices?

I poured us more beer from the pitcher and decided to test the vision.

"I remember one night," I said, "when you were all in green and I in my colors. How lovely things seemed-and the music..."

Her face grew slightly wistful, the cheeks smoothing.

"Yes," she said. "Were not those the days? . . . You really have not been in touch?"

"Word of honor," I said, for whatever that was worth.

"Things have grown far worse," she said, "and the Shadows contain more horrors than any had thought. . . ."

"And ...?" I inquired.

"He still has his troubles," she finished,

"Oh."

"Yes," she went on, "and he'll want to know where you stand."

"Right here," I said,

"You mean. ..

"For now," I told her, perhaps too quickly, for her eyes had widened too much, "since I still don't know the full state of affairs," whatever that meant.

"Oh."

And we finished our steaks and the beer, giving the two bones to the dogs.

We sipped some coffee afterward, and I came to feel a bit brotherly but suppressed it. I asked, "What of the others?" which could mean anything, but sounded safe.

I was afraid for a moment that she was going to ask me what I meant. Instead, though, she leaned back in her chair, stared at the ceiling, and said, "As always, no one new has been heard from. Perhaps yours was the wisest way. I'm enjoying it myself. But how can one forget-the glory?" I lowered my eyes, because I wasn't sure what they should contain. "One can't," I said. "One never can."

There followed a long, uncomfortable silence, after which she said: "Do you hate me?"

"Of course not," I replied. "How could I-all things considered?"

This seemed to please her, and she showed her teeth, which were very white.

"Good, and thank you," she said. "Whatever else, you're a gentleman."

I bowed and smirked.

"You'll turn my head."

"Hardly," she said, "all things considered."

And I felt uncomfortable.

My anger was there, and I wondered whether she knew who it was that I needed to stay it. I felt that she did. I fought with the desire to ask it outright, suppressed it.

"Well, what do you propose doing?" she finally asked, and being on the spot I replied, "Of course, you don't trust me. . ."

"How could we?"

I determined to remember that we.

"Well, then. For the time being. I'm willing to place myself under your surveillance. I'll be glad to stay right here, where you can keep an eye on me."

"And afterward?"

"Afterward? We'll see."

"Clever," she said, "very clever. And you place me in an awkward position." (I had said it because I didn't have any place else to go. and my blackmail money wouldn't last me too long.) "Yes, of course you may stay. But let me warn you"-and here she fingered what I had

thought to be some sort of pendant on a chain about her neck-"this is an ultrasonic dog whistle. Donner and Blitzen here have four brothers, and they're all trained to take care of nasty people and they all respond to my whistle. So don't start to walk toward any place where you won't be desired. A toot or two and even you will go down before them. Their kind is the reason there are no wolves left in Ireland. you know."

"I know," I said, realizing that I did.

"Yes." she continued, "Eric will like it that you are my guest. It should cause him to leave you alone, which is what you want, n'est-ce-pas?"

"Oui." I said.

Eric! It meant something! I had known an Eric, and it had been very important, somehow. that I did. Not recently. But the Eric I had known was still around, and that was important.

Why?

I hated him, that was one reason. Hated him enough to have contemplated killing him. Perhaps I'd even tried.

Also, there was some bond between us, I knew.

Kinship?

Yes, that was it. Neither of us liked it being brothers. ...I remembered, I remembered....

Big, powerful Eric, with his wet curly beard, and his eyes—just like Evelyn's!

I was racked with a new surge of memory, as my temples began to throb and the back of my neck was suddenly warm.

I didn't let any of it show on my face, but forced myself to take another drag on my cigarette, another sip of beer, as I realized that Evelyn was indeed my sister! Only Evelyn wasn't her name. I couldn't think of what it was, but it wasn't Evelyn. I'd be careful, I resolved. I'd not use any name at all when addressing her, until I remembered.

And what of me? And what was it that was going on around me?

Eric, I suddenly felt, had had some connection with my accident. It should have been a fatal one, only I'd pulled through. He was the one, wasn't he? Yes, my feelings replied. It had to be Eric. And Evelyn was working with him, paying Greenwood to keep me in a coma. Better than being dead, but...

I realized that I had just somehow delivered myself into Eric's hands by coming to Evelyn, and I would be his prisoner, would be open to new attack, if I stayed.

But she had suggested that my being her guest would cause him to leave me alone. I wondered. I couldn't take anything at face value. I'd have to be constantly on my guard. Perhaps it would be better if I just went away, let my memories return gradually.

But there was this terrible sense of urgency. I had to find out the full story as soon as possible and act as soon as I knew it. It lay like a compulsion upon me. If danger was the price of memory and risk the cost of opportunity, then so be it. I'd stay.

"And I remember," Evelyn said, and I realized that she had been talking for a while and I hadn't even been listening. Perhaps it was because of the reflective quality of her words, not really requiring any sort of response—and because of the urgency of my thoughts.

"And I remember the day you beat Julian at his favorite game and he threw a glass of wine at you and cursed you. But you took the prize. And he was suddenly afraid he had gone too far. But you laughed then, though, and drank a glass with him. I think he felt badly over that show of temper, normally being so cool, and I think he was envious of you that day. Do you recall? I think he has, to a certain extent, imitated many of your ways since then. But I still hate him and hope that he goes down shortly. I feel he will...."

Julian, Julian, Julian. Yes and no. Something about a game and my baiting a man and shattering an almost legendary self-control. Yes, there was a feeling of familiarity; and no, I couldn't really say for certain what all had been involved.

"And Caine, how you gulled him! He hates you yet, you know. . . ."

I gathered I wasn't very well liked. Somehow, the feeling pleased me.

And Caine, too, sounded familiar. Very.

Eric, Julian, Caine, Corwin. The names swam around in my head, and in a way, it was too much to hold within me.

"It's been so long. . . ." I said, almost involuntarily, and it seemed to be true.

"Corwin," she said, "let's not fence. You want more than security, I know that. And you're still strong enough to get something out of this, if you play your hand just right. I can't guess what you have in mind, but maybe we can make a deal with Eric." The we had obviously shifted. She had come to some sort of conclusion as to my worth in whatever was going on. She saw a chance to gain something for herself, I could tell. I smiled, just a little. "Is that why you came here?" she continued. "Do you have a proposal for Eric, something which might require a go-between?"

"I may," I replied, "after I've thought about it some more. I've still so recently recovered that I have much pondering to do. I wanted to be in the best place, though, where I could act quickly, if I decided my best interests lay with Eric."

"Take care," she said. "You know I'll report every word."

"Of course," I said, not knowing that at all and groping for a quick

hedge, "unless your best interests were conjoined with my own."

Her eyebrows moved closer together, and tiny wrinkles appeared between them.

"I'm not sure what you're proposing."

"I'm not proposing anything, yet," I said. "I'm just being completely open and honest with you and telling you I don't know. I'm not positive I want to make a deal with Eric. After all. . ." I let the words trail off on purpose, for I had nothing to follow them with, though I felt I should.

"You've been offered an alternative?" She stood up suddenly, seizing her whistle. "Bleys! Of course!"

"Sit down," I said, "and don't he ridiculous. Would I place myself in your hands this calmly, this readily, just to be dog meat because you happen to think of Bleys?"

She relaxed, maybe even sagged a little, then reseated herself.

"Possibly not," she finally said, "but I know you're a gambler, and I know you're treacherous. If you came here to dispose of a partisan, don't even bother trying. I'm not that important. You should know that by now. Besides, I always thought you rather liked me."

"I did, and I do," I said, "and you have nothing to worry about, so don't. It's interesting, though, that you should mention Bleys."

Bait, bait, bait! There was so much I wanted to know!

"Why? Has he approached you?"

"I'd rather not say," I replied, hoping it would give me an edge of some kind, and now that I knew Bleys' gender: "If he had, I'd have answered him the same as I would Eric-'I'll think about it.'"

"Bleys," she repeated, and Bleys, I said to myself inside my head, Bleys. I like you. I forget why, and I know there are reasons why I shouldn't-but I like you. I know it.

We sat awhile, and I felt fatigue but didn't want to show it. I should be strong. I knew I had to be strong.

I sat there and smiled and said, "Nice library you've got here," and she said, "Thank you."

"Bleys," she repeated after a time. "Do you really think he has a chance?"

I shrugged.

"Who knows? Not I, for certain. Maybe he does. Maybe not, too."

Then she stared at me, her eyes slightly wide, and her mouth opening.

"Not you?" she said, "You're not proposing to try yourself, are you?"

I laughed then, solely for purposes of countering her emotion.

"Don't he silly," I said when I'd finished. "Me?"

But as she said it, I knew she'd struck some chord, some deep-

buried thing which replied with a powerful "Why not?"

I was suddenly afraid.

She seemed relieved, though, at my disavowal of whatever it was I was disavowing. She smiled then, and indicated a built-in bar off to my left.

"I'd like a little Irish Mist," she said.

"So would I, for that matter," I replied, and I rose and fetched two.

"You know," I said, after I'd reseated myself, "it's pleasant to be together with you this way, even if it is only for a short time. It brings back memories."

And she smiled and was lovely.

"You're right," she said, sipping her drink. "I almost feel in Amber with you around," and I almost dropped my drink.

Amber! The word had sent a bolt of lightning down my spine!

Then she began to cry, and I rose and put my arm around her shoulders to comfort her.

"Don't cry, little girl. Please don't. It makes me unhappy, too." Amber! There was something there, something electrical and potent! "There will be good days once again." I said, softly.

"Do you really believe that?" she asked.

"Yes," I said loudly. "Yes, I do!"

"You're crazy," she said. "Maybe that's why you were always my favorite brother too. I can almost believe anything you say, even though I know you're crazy."

Then she cried a little more and stopped.

"Corwin," she said, "if you do make it—if by some wild and freakish chance out of Shadow you should make it—will you remember your little sister Florimel?"

"Yes," I said, knowing it to be her name. "Yes, I will remember you."

"Thank you. I will tell Eric only the essentials, and mention Bleys not at all, nor my latest suspicions."

"Thank you, Flora."

"But I don't trust you worth a damn," she added. "Remember that, too."

"That goes without saying."

Then she summoned her maid to show me to a room, and I managed to undress, collapsed into the bed, and slept for eleven hours.

Chapter 3

In the morning she was gone, and there was no message. Her maid served me breakfast in the kitchen and went away to do maid-things. I'd disregarded the notion of trying to pump information out of the woman, as she either wouldn't know or wouldn't tell me the things I wanted to know and would no doubt also report my attempt to Flora. So, since it seemed I had the nun of the house, I decided I'd return to the library and see what I could learn there. Besides, I like libraries. It makes me feel comfortable and secure to have walls of words, beautiful and wise, all around me. I always feel better when I can see that there is something to hold back the shadows.

Donner or Blitzen, or one of their relatives, appeared from somewhere and followed me up the hallway, walking stiff-legged and sniffing after my spoor. I tried to make friends with him, but it was like exchanging pleasantries with the state trooper who signaled you to pull off the road. I looked into some of the other rooms as I went along, and they were just places. innocuous-looking ones.

So I entered the library, and Africa still faced me. I closed the door behind me to keep the dogs out, and I strolled around the room. reading the titles on the shelves.

There were lots of history books. In fact, they seemed to dominate her collection. There were also many art books, of the big and expensive variety, and I leafed through a few of these. I usually do my best real thinking when I'm thinking about something else.

I wondered at the sources of Flora's obvious wealth. If we were related, did that mean that perhaps I enjoyed somewhat of opulence, also? I thought about my economic and social status, my profession, my origins. I had the feeling that I'd never worried much about money, and that there'd always been enough or ways of getting it, to keep me satisfied. Did I own a big house like this? I couldn't remember.

What did I do?

I sat behind her desk and examined my mind for any special caches of knowledge I might possess. It is difficult to examine yourself this way, as a stranger. Maybe that's why I couldn't come up with anything. What's yours is yours and a part of you and it just seems to belong there, inside. That's all.

A doctor? That came to mind as I was viewing some of Da Vinci's anatomical drawings. Almost by reflex, in my mind, I had begun going through the steps of various surgical operations. I realized then that I had operated on people in the past.

But that wasn't it. While I realized that I had a medical

background, I knew that it was a part of something else. I knew, somehow, that I was not a practicing surgeon. What then? What else was involved?

Something caught my eve.

Seated there at the desk, I commanded a view of the far wall. on which, among other things, hung an antique cavalry saber, which I had overlooked the first time around the room. I rose and crossed over to it, took it down from its pegs.

In my mind, I tsked at the shape it was in. I wanted an oily rag and a whetstone, to make it the way it should he once again. I knew something about antique arms, edged weapons in particular.

The saber felt light and useful in my hand, and I felt capable with it. I struck an en garde. I parried and cut a few times. Yes. I could use the thing.

So what sort of background was that? I looked around for new memory joggers.

Nothing else occurred to me, so I replaced the blade and returned to the desk. Sitting there, I decided to go through the thing.

I started with the middle one and worked my way up the left side and down the right, drawer by drawer.

Stationery, envelopes, postage stamps, paper clips, pencil stubs, rubber bands—all the usual items.

I had pulled each drawer all the way out though, and held it in my lap as I'd inspected its contents. It wasn't just an idea. It was part of some sort of training I'd once received, which told me I should inspect the sides and bottoms as well.

One thing almost slipped by me, but caught my attention at the last instant: the back of the lower right-hand drawer did not rise as high as the backs of the other drawers.

This indicated something. and when I knelt and looked inside the drawer space I saw a little box-like affair fixed to the upper side.

It was a small drawer itself, way in the back, and it was locked.

It took me about a minute of fooling around with paper clips, safety pins, and finally a metal shoehorn I'd seen in another drawer. The shoehorn did the trick.

The drawer contained a packet of playing cards.

And the packet bore a device which caused me to stiffen where I knelt, perspiration suddenly wetting my brow and my breath coming rapidly.

It bore a white unicorn on a grass field, rampant, facing to the dexter.

And I knew that device and it hurt me that I could not name it.

I opened the packet and extracted the cards. They were on the order of tarots, with their wands, pentacles, cups, and swords, but the

Greater Trumps were quite different.

I replaced both drawers, being careful not to lock the smaller one, before I continued my inspection.

They were almost lifelike in appearance, the Greater Trumps ready to step right out through those glistening surfaces. The cards seemed quite cold to my touch, and it gave me a distinct pleasure to handle them. I had once had a packet like this myself, I suddenly knew.

I began spreading them on the blotter before me. The one bore a wily-looking little man, with a sharp nose and a laughing mouth and a shock of straw-colored hair. He was dressed in something like a Renaissance costume of orange, red and brown. He wore long hose and a tight-fitting embroidered doublet. And I knew him. His name was Random.

Next, there was the passive countenance of Julian, dark hair hanging long, blue eyes containing neither passion nor compassion. He was dressed completely in scaled white armor, not silver or metallic-colored, but looking as if it had been enameled. I knew, though, that it was terribly tough and shock-resistant, despite its decorative and festive appearance. He was the man I had beaten at his favorite game, for which he had thrown a glass of wine at me. I knew him and I hated him.

Then came the swarthy, dark-eyed countenance of Caine, dressed all in satin that was black and green, wearing a dark three-cornered hat set at a rakish angle, a green plume of feathers trailing down the back. He was standing in profile, one arm akimbo, and the toes of his boots curled upwards, and he wore an emerald-studded dagger at his belt. There was ambivalence in my heart.

Then there was Eric. Handsome by anyone's standards, his hair was so dark as to be almost blue. His beard curled around the mouth that always smiled, and he was dressed simply in a leather jacket and leggings, a plain cloak, high black boots, and he wore a red sword belt bearing a long silvery saber and clasped with a ruby, and his high cloak collar round his head was lined with red and the trimmings of his sleeves matched it. His hands, thumbs hooked behind his belt, were terribly strong and prominent. A pair of black gloves jutted from the belt near his right hip. He it was, I was certain, that had tried to kill me on that day I had almost died. I studied him and I feared him somewhat.

Then there was Benedict, tall and dour, thin, thin of body, thin of face, wide of mind. He wore orange and yellow and brown and reminded me of haystacks and pumpkins and scarecrows and the Legend of Sleepy Hollow. He had a long strong jaw and hazel eyes and brown hair that never curled. He stood beside a tan horse and leaned

upon a lance about which was twined a rope of flowers. He seldom laughed. I liked him.

I paused when I uncovered the next card, and my heart leaped forward and banged against my sternum and asked to be let out.

It was me.

I knew the me I shaved and this was the guy behind the mirror. Green eyes, black hair, dressed in black and silver, yes. I had on a cloak and it was slightly furled as by a wind. I had on black boots, like Eric's, and I too wore a blade, only mine was heavier, though not quite as long as his. I had my gloves on and they were silver and scaled. The clasp at my neck was cast in the form of a silver rose.

Me. Corwin.

And a big, powerful man regarded me from the next card. He resembled me quite strongly, save that his jaw was heavier. And I knew he was bigger than I, though slower. His strength was a thing out of legend. He wore a dressing gown of blue and gray clasped about the middle with a wide, black belt, and he stood laughing. About his neck, on a heavy cord, there hung a silver bunting horn. He wore a fringe heard and a light mustache. In his right hand he held a goblet of wine. I felt a sudden affection for him. His name then occurred to me. He was Gerard.

Then came a fiery bearded, flame-crowned man, dressed all in red and orange, mainly of silk stuff, and he held a sword in his right hand and a glass of wine in his left, and the devil himself danced behind his eyes, as blue as Flora's, or Eric's. His chin was slight, but the beard covered it. His sword was inlaid with an elaborate filigree of a golden color. He wore two huge rings on his right hand and one on his left: an emerald, a ruby, and a sapphire, respectively. This, I knew, was Bleys.

Then there was a figure both like Bley's and myself. My features, though smaller, my eyes, Bleys' hair, beardless. He wore a riding suit of green and sat atop a white horse, heading toward the dexter side of the card. There was a quality of both strength and weakness, questing and abandonment about him. I both approved and disapproved, liked and was repelled by, this one. His name was Brand, I knew. As soon as I laid eyes upon him, I knew.

In fact, I realized that I knew them all well, remembered them all, with their strengths, their weaknesses, their victories, their defeats.

For they were my brothers.

I lit a cigarette I'd filched from Flora's desk box, and I leaned back and considered the things I had recalled.

They were my brothers, those eight strange men garbed in their strange costumes. And I knew that it was right and fitting that they should dress in whatever manner they chose, just as it was right for

me to wear the black and the silver. Then I chuckled, as I realized what I was wearing, what I had purchased in the little clothing store of that little town I had stopped in after my departure from Greenwood.

I had on black slacks, and all three of the shirts I had purchased had been of a grayish, silvery color. And my jacket, too, was black.

I returned to the cards, and there was Flora in a gown green as the sea, just as I'd remembered her the previous evening; and then there was a black-haired girl with the same blue eyes, and her hair hung long and she was dressed all in black, with a girdle of silver about her waist. My eyes filled with tears, why I don't know. Her name was Deirdre. Then there was Fiona, with hair like Bleys or Brand, my eyes, and a complexion like mother of pearl. I hated her the second I turned over the card. Next was Llewella, whose hair matched her jade-colored eyes, dressed in shimmering gray and green with a lavender belt, and looking moist and sad. For some reason, I knew she was not like the rest of us. But she, too, was my sister.

I felt a terrible sense of distance and removal from all these people. Yet somehow they seemed physically close.

The cards were so very cold on my fingertips that I put them down again, though with a certain sense of reluctance at having to relinquish their touch.

There were no more, though. All the rest were minor cards. And I knew, somehow, that somehow, again—ah, somehow!-that several were missing.

For the life of me, however, I did not know what the missing Trumps represented.

I was strangely saddened by this, and I picked up my cigarette and mused.

Why did all these things rush back so easily when I viewed the cards—rush back without dragging their contexts along with them? I knew more now than I'd known before, in the way of names and faces. But that was about all.

I couldn't figure the significance of the fact that we were all done up in cards this way. I had a terribly strong desire to own a pack of them, however. If I picked up Flora's. though, I knew she'd spot in a hurry that they were missing, and I'd be in trouble. Therefore, I put them back in the little drawer behind the big drawer and locked them in again. Then, God, how I racked my brains! But to little avail.

Until I recalled a magical word.

Amber.

I had been greatly upset by the word on the previous evening. I had been sufficiently upset so that I had avoided thinking of it since then. But now I courted it. Now I rolled it around my mind and

examined all the associations that sprang up when it struck.

The word was charged with a mighty longing and a massive nostalgia. It had, wrapped up inside it, a sense of forsaken beauty, grand achievement. and a feeling of power that was terrible and almost ultimate. Somehow, the word belonged in my vocabulary. Somehow, I was part of it and it was a part of me. It was a place name, I knew then. It was the name of a place I once had known. There came no pictures, though, only emotions.

How long I sat so, I do not know. Time had somehow divorced itself from my reveries.

I realized then, from the center of my thoughts, that there had come a gentle rapping upon the door. Then the handle slowly turned and the maid, whose name was Carmella, entered and asked me if I was interested in lunch.

It seemed like a good idea, so I followed her back to the kitchen and ate half a chicken and drank a quart of milk.

I took a pot of coffee back to the library with me, avoiding the dogs as I went. I was into the second cup when the telephone rang.

I longed to pick it up, but I figured there must be extensions all over the house and Carmella would probably get it from somewhere.

I was wrong. It kept ringing.

Finally, I couldn't resist it any longer.

"Hello," I said, "this is the Flaumel residence."

"May I speak with Mrs. Flaumel please?"

It was a man's voice, rapid and slightly nervous. He sounded out of breath and his words were masked and surrounded by the faint ringing and the ghost voices that indicate long distance.

"I'm sorry." I told him. "She's not here right now. May I take a message or have her call you back?"

"Who am I talking to?" he demanded.

I hesitated, then, "Corwin's the name," I told him.

"My God!" he said, and a long silence followed.

I was beginning to think he'd hung up. I said, "Hello?" again, just as he started talking.

"Is she still alive?" he asked.

"Of course she's still alive. Who the hell am I talking to?"

"Don't you recognize the voice, Corwin? This is Random. Listen. I'm in California and I'm in trouble. I was calling to ask Flora for sanctuary. Are you with her?"

"Temporarily," I said.

"I see. Will you give me your protection, Corwin?" Pause, then, "Please?"

"As much as I can," I said, "but I can't commit Flora to anything without consulting her."

"Will you protect me against her?"

"Yes."

"Then you're good enough for me, man. I'm going to try to make it to New York now. I'll be coming by a rather circuitous route, so I don't know how long it will take me. If I can avoid the wrong shadows, I'll he seeing you whenever. Wish me luck."

"Luck," I said.

Then there was a click and I was listening to a distant ringing and the voices of the ghosts.

So cocky little Random was in trouble! I had a feeling it shouldn't have bothered me especially. But now, he was one of the keys to my past, and quite possibly my future also. So I would try to help him, in any way I could, until I'd learned all I wanted from him. I knew that there wasn't much brotherly love lost between the two of us. But I knew that on the one hand he was nobody's fool; he was resourceful, shrewd, strangely sentimental over the damnedest things; and on the other hand, his word wasn't worth the spit behind it, and he'd probably sell my corpse to the medical school of his choice if he could get much for it. I remembered the little fink all right, with only a touch of affection, perhaps for a few pleasant times it seemed we had spent together. But trust him? Never. I decided I wouldn't tell Flora he was coming until the last possible moment. He might be made to serve as an ace, or at least a knave, in the hole.

So I added some hot coffee to what remained in my cup and sipped it slowly.

Who was he running from?

Not Eric, certainly, or he wouldn't have been calling here. I wondered then concerning his question as to whether Flora was dead, just because I happened to be present here. Was she really that strongly allied with the brother I knew I hated that it was common knowledge in the family that I'd do her in, too, given the chance? It seemed strange, but then he'd asked the question.

And what was it in which they were allied? What was the source of this tension, this opposition? Why was it that Random was running?

Amber.

That was the answer.

Amber. Somehow, the key to everything lay in Amber, I knew. The secret of the entire mess was in Amber, in some event that had transpired in that place, and fairly recently, I'd judge. I'd have to be on my toes. I'd have to pretend to the knowledge I didn't possess, while piece by piece I mined it from those who had it. I felt confident that I could do it. There was enough distrust circulating for everyone to be cagey. I'd play on that. I'd get what I needed and take what I wanted, and I'd remember those who helped me and step on the rest. For this, I

knew, was the law by which our family lived, and I was a true son of my father....

My headache came on again suddenly, throbbing to crack my skull.

Something about my father I thought, guessed, felt—was what had served to set it off. But I wasn't sure why or how.

After a time, it subsided and I slept, there in the chair. After a much longer time, the door opened and Flora entered. It was night outside, once more.

She was dressed in a green silk blouse and a long woolen skirt that was gray. She had on walking shoes and heavy stockings. Her hair was pulled back behind her head and she looked slightly pale. She still wore her hound whistle.

"Good evening," I said, rising.

But she did not reply. Instead, she walked across the room to the bar, poured herself a shot of Jack Daniels, and tossed it off like a man. Then she poured another and took it with her to the big chair.

I lit a cigarette and handed it to her.

She nodded, then said, "The Road to Amber—is difficult."

"Why?"

She gave me a very puzzled look.

"When is the last time you tried it?"

I shrugged.

"I don't remember."

"Be that way then," she said. "I just wondered how much of it was your doing.

I didn't reply because I didn't know what she was talking about. But then I recalled that there was an easier way than the Road to get to the place called Amber. Obviously, she lacked it.

"You're missing some Trumps," I said then suddenly, in a voice which was almost mine.

She sprang to her feet, half her drink spilling over the back of her hand.

"Give them back!" she cried, reaching for the whistle.

I moved forward and seized her shoulders,

"I don't have them," I said. "I was just making an observation."

She relaxed a bit, then began to cry, and I pushed her back down, gently, into the chair.

"I thought you meant you'd taken the ones I had left," she said. "Rather than just making a nasty and obvious comment."

I didn't apologize. It didn't seem right that I should have to.

"How far did you get?"

"Not far at all." Then she laughed and regarded me with a new light in her eyes.

"I see what you've done now, Corwin," she said, and I lit a cigarette in order to cover any sort of need for a reply.

"Some of those things were yours, weren't they? You blocked my way to Amber before you came here, didn't you? You knew I'd go to Eric. But I can't now. I'll have to wait till he comes to me. Clever. You want to draw him here, don't you? He'll send a messenger, though. He won't come himself."

There was a strange tone of admiration in the voice of this woman who was admitting she'd just tried to sell me out to my enemy. and still would—given half a chance—as she talked about something she thought I'd done which had thrown a monkey wrench into her plans. How could anyone be so admittedly Machiavellian in the presence of a proposed victim? The answer rang back immediately from the depths of my mind. it is the way of our kind. We don't have to be subtle with each other. Though I thought she lacked somewhat the finesse of a true professional.

"Do you think I'm stupid, Flora?" I asked. "Do you think I came here just for purposes of waiting around for you to hand me over to Erie? Whatever you ran into, it served you right."

"All right I don't play in your league! But you're in exile, too! That shows you weren't so smart!"

Somehow her words burned and I knew they were wrong.

"Like hell I am!" I said.

She laughed again.

"I knew that would get a rise out of you," she said. "All right, you walk in the Shadows on purpose then. You're crazy."

I shrugged.

She said, "What do you want? Why did you really come here?"

"I was curious what you were up to," I said. "That's all. You can't keep me here if I don't want to stay. Even Eric couldn't do that. Maybe I really did just want to visit with you. Maybe I'm getting sentimental in my old age. Whatever, I'm going to stay a little longer now, and then probably go away for good. If you hadn't been so quick to see what you could get for me, you might have profited a lot more, lady. You asked me to remember you one day, if a certain thing occurred...."

It took several seconds for what I thought I was implying to sink in.

Then she said, "You're going to try! You're really going to try!"

"You're goddamn right I'm going to try," I said, knowing that I would, whatever it was, "and you can tell that to Eric if you want, but remember that I might make it. Bear in mind that if I do, it might be nice to be my friend."

I sure wished I knew what the hell I was talking about, but I'd picked up enough terms and felt the importance attached to them, so

that I could use them properly without knowing what they meant. But they felt right, so very right. . . .

Suddenly, she was kissing me.

"I won't tell him. Really, I won't, Corwin! I think you can do it. Bleys will be difficult, but Gerard would probably help you, and maybe Benedict. Then Caine would swing over, when he saw what was happening—"

"I can do my own planning," I said.

Then she drew away. She poured two glasses of wine and handed one to me.

"To the future," she said.

"I'll always drink to that."

And we did.

Then she refilled mine and studied me.

"It had to be Eric, Bleys, or you," she said. "You're the only ones with any guts or brains. But you'd removed yourself from the picture for so long that I'd counted you out of the running."

"It just goes to show you never can tell."

I sipped my drink and hoped she'd shut up for just a minute. It seemed to me she was being a bit too obvious in trying to play on every side available. There was something bothering me, and I wanted to think about it.

How old was I?

That question, I knew, was a part of the answer to the terrible sense of distance and removal that I felt from all the persons depicted on the playing cards. I was older than I appeared to be. (Thirtyish, I'd seemed when I looked at me in the mirror—but now I knew that it was because the shadows would lie for me.) I was far, far older, and it had been a very long time since I had seen my brothers and my sisters, all together and friendly, existing side by side as they did on the cards, with no tension, no friction among them.

We heard the sound of the bell, and Carmella moving to answer the door.

"That would be brother Random," I said, knowing I was right. "He's under my protection."

Her eyes widened, then she smiled, as though she appreciated some clever thing I had done.

I hadn't, of course. but I was glad to let her think so.

It made me feel safer.

Chapter 4

I felt safe for perhaps all of three minutes. I beat Carmella to the door and flung It open.

He staggered in and immediately pushed the door shut behind himself and shot the bolt. There were lines under those light eyes and he wasn't wearing a bright doublet and long hose. He needed a shave and he had on a brown wool suit. He carried a gabardine overcoat over one arm and wore dark suede shoes. But he was Random, all right-the Random I had seen on the card-only the laughing mouth looked tired and there was dirt beneath his fingernails.

"Corwin!" he said, and embraced me.

I squeezed his shoulder. "You look as if you could use a drink," I said.

"Yes. Yes. Yes...." he agreed, and I steered him toward the library.

About three minutes later. after he had seated himself, with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, he

said to me, "They're after me. They'll be here soon."

Flora let out a little shriek, which we both ignored.

"Who?" I asked.

"People out of the shadows," he said. "I don't know who they are, or who sent them. There are four or five though, maybe even six. They were on the plane with me. I took a jet. They occurred around Denver. I moved the plane several times to subtract them. but it didn't work-and I didn't want to get too far off the track. I shook them in Manhattan, but it's only a matter of time. I think they'll be here soon."

"And you've no idea at all who sent them?"

He stalled for an instant.

"Well, I guess we'd he safe in limiting it to the family. Maybe Bleys, maybe Julian, maybe Caine. Maybe even you, to get me here. Hope not, though. You didn't, did you?"

"'Fraid not," I said. "How tough do they look?"

He shrugged. "If it were only two or three, I'd have tried to pull an ambush. But not with that whole crowd."

He was a little guy, maybe five-six in height, weighing perhaps one thirty-five. But he sounded as if he meant it when he said he'd take on two or three bruisers, single-handed. I wondered suddenly about my own physical strength, being his brother. I felt comfortably strong. I knew I'd be willing to take on any one man in a fair fight without any special fears. How strong was I?

Suddenly, I knew I would have a chance to find out.

There came a knocking at the front door.

"What shall we do?" asked Flora.

Random laughed, undid his necktie, tossed it atop his coat on the desk. He stripped off his suit jacket then and looked about the room. His eyes fell upon the saber and he was across the room in an instant and had it in his hand. I felt the weight of the .32 within my jacket pocket and thumbed off the safety catch.

"Do?" Random asked. "There exists a probability that they will gain entrance," he said. "Therefore, they will enter. When is the last time you stood to battle, sister?"

"It has been too long," she replied.

"Then you had better start remembering fast," he told her, "because it is only a matter of small time. They are guided, I can tell you. But there are three of us and at most only twice as many of them. Why worry?"

"We don't know what they are," she said.

The knocking came again.

"What does it matter?"

"Nothing," I said. "Shall I go and let them in?" They both blanched slightly.

"We might as well wait"

"I might call the cops." I said.

They both laughed, almost hysterically. "Or Eric," I said, suddenly looking at her. But she shook her head.

"We just don't have the time. We have the Trump, but by the time he could respond-if he chose to-it would be too late."

"And this might even be his doing, eh?" said Random.

"I doubt it," she replied, "very much. It's not his style."

"True," I replied, just for the hell of it, and to let them know I was with things.

The sound of knocking came once again, and much more loudly.

"What about Carmella?" I asked, upon a sudden thought.

Flora shook her head.

"I have decided that it is improbable that she will answer the door."

"But you don't know what you're up against," Random cried, and he was suddenly gone from the room.

I followed him, along the hallway and into the foyer, in time to stop Carmella from opening the door.

We sent her back to her own quarters with instructions to lock herself in, and Random observed, "That shows the strength of the opposition. Where are we, Corwin?"

I shrugged.

"If I knew, I'd tell you. For the moment at least, we're in this together. Step back!"

And I opened the door.

The first man tried to push me aside, and I stiff-armed him back.

There were six, I could see that.

"What do you want?" I asked them.

But never a word was spoken, and I saw guns.

I kicked out and slammed the door again and shot the bolt.

"Okay, they're really there," I said. "But how do I know you're not pulling something?"

"You don't," he said, "but I really wish I were. They look wild."

I had to agree. The guys on the porch were heavily built and had hats pulled down to cover their eyes. Their faces had all been covered with shadows.

"I wish I knew where we are," said Random,

I felt a hackle-raising vibration, in the vicinity of my eardrums. I knew, in that moment, that Flora had blown her whistle.

When I heard a window break, somewhere off to my right, I was not surprised to hear a growled rumbling and some baying. somewhere off to my left.

"She's called her dogs," I said, "six mean and vicious brutes, which could under other circumstances be after us.

Random nodded, and we both headed off in the direction of the shattering.

When we reached the living room, two men were already inside and both had guns.

I dropped the first and hit the floor, firing at the second. Random leaped above me, brandishing his blade, and I saw the second man's head depart his shoulders.

By then, two more were through the window. I emptied the automatic at them, and I heard the snarling of Flora's hounds mixed with gunfire that was not my own.

I saw three of the men upon the floor and the same number of Flora's dogs. It made me feel good to think we had gotten half them, and as the rest came through the window I killed another in a manner which surprised me.

Suddenly, and without thinking, I picked up a huge overstuffed chair and hurled it perhaps thirty feet across the room. It broke the back of the man it struck.

I leaped toward the remaining two, but before I crossed the room, Random had pierced one of them with the saber, leaving him for the dogs to finish off, and was turning toward the other.

The other was pulled down before he could act, however. He killed another of the dogs before we could stop him, but he never killed anything again after that. Random strangled him.

It turned out that two of the dogs were dead and one was badly hurt. Random killed the injured one with a quick thrust, and we

turned our attention to the men.

There was something unusual about their appearance

Flora entered and helped us to decide what.

For one thing, all six had uniformly bloodshot eyes. Very, very bloodshot eyes. With them, though, the condition seemed normal.

For another, all had an extra joint to each finger and thumb, and sharp, forward-curving spurs on the backs of their hands.

All of them had prominent jaws, and when I forced one open, I counted forty-four teeth, most of them longer than human teeth, and several looking to be much sharper. Their flesh was grayish and hard and shiny.

There were undoubtedly other differences also, but those were sufficient to prove a point of some sort.

We took their weapons, and I hung onto three small, flat pistols.

"They crawled Out of the Shadows, all right," said Random, and I nodded. "And I was lucky, too. It doesn't seem they suspected I'd turn up with the reinforcements I did-a militant brother and around half a ton of dogs."

He went and peered out the broken window, and I decided to let him do it himself. "Nothing," he said, after a time. "I'm sure we got them all," and he drew the heavy orange drapes closed and pushed a lot of high-backed furniture in front of them. While he was doing that, I went through all their pockets.

I wasn't really surprised that I turned up nothing in the way of identification.

"Let's go back to the library," he said, "so I can finish my drink."

He cleaned off the blade, carefully, before he seated himself, however, and he replaced it on the pegs. I fetched Flora a drink while he did this.

"So it would seem I'm temporarily safe," he said, "now that there are three of us sharing the picture."

"So it would seem," Flora agreed.

"God, I haven't eaten since yesterday!" he announced. So Flora went to tell Carmella it was safe to come out now, so long as she stayed clear of the living room, and to bring a lot of food to the library.

As soon as she left the room, Random turned to me and asked, "Like, what's it between you?"

"Don't turn your back on her."

"She's still Eric's?"

"So far as I can tell."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I was trying to sucker Eric into coming around after me himself. He knows it's the only way he'll really get me, and I wanted to see

how badly he wanted to."

Random shook his head.

"I don't think he'll do it. No percentage. So long as you're here and he's there, why bother sticking his neck out? He's still got the stronger position. If you want him, you'll have to go after him."

"I've just about come to the same conclusion."

His eyes gleamed then, and his old smile appeared. He ran one hand through his straw-colored hair and wouldn't let go of my eyes.

"Are you going to do it?" he asked.

"Maybe," I said.

"Don't 'maybe' me, baby. It's written all over you. I'd almost be willing to go along, you know. Of all my relations, I like sex the best and Eric the least."

I lit a cigarette, while I considered.

"You're thinking," he said while I thought, "'How far can I trust Random this time? He is sneaky and mean and just like his name, and he will doubtless sell me out If someone offers him a better deal.' True?"

I nodded.

"However, brother Corwin, remember that while I've never done you much good, I've never done you any especial harm either. Oh, a few pranks, I'll admit. But, all in all, you might say we've gotten along best of all in the family-that is, we've stayed out of each other's ways. Think it over. I believe I hear Flora or her woman coming now, so let's change the subject. . . . But quick I don't suppose you have a deck of the family's favorite playing cards around, do you?"

I shook my head.

Flora entered the room and said, "Carmella will bring in some food shortly."

We drank to that, and he winked at me behind her back.

The following morning, the bodies were gone from the living room, there were no stains upon the carpet, the window appeared to have been repaired, and Random explained that he had "taken care of things." I did not see fit to question him further.

We borrowed Flora's Mercedes and went for a drive. The countryside seemed strangely altered. I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was that was missing or new, but somehow things felt different. This, too, gave me a headache when I attempted to consider it, so I decided to suspend such thinking for the nonce.

I was at the wheel, Random at my side. I observed that I would like to be back in Amber again-just to see what sort of response it would obtain.

"I have been wondering," he replied, "whether you were out for vengeance, pure and simple, or something more," thereby shifting the

ball back to me, to answer or not to answer, as I saw fit.

I saw fit. I used the stock phrase:

"I've been thinking about that, too," I said, "trying to figure my chances. You know, I just might 'try.'"

He turned toward me then (he had been staring out of the side window) and said:

"I suppose we've all had that ambition, or at least that thought-I know I have, though I dismissed me early in the game-and the way I feel about it, it's worth the attempt. You're asking me, I know, whether I'll help you.

The answer is 'yes.' I'll do it just to screw up the others." Then, "What do you think of Flora? Would she be of any help?"

"I doubt it very much," I said. "She'd throw in if things were certain. But, then, what's certain at this point?"

"Or any," he added.

"Or any," I repeated, so he'd think I knew what sort of response I would obtain.

I was afraid to confide in him as to the condition of my memory. I was also afraid to tell him, so I didn't. There were so very many things I wanted to know, but I had no one to turn to. I thought about it a bit as we drove along.

"Well, when do you want to start?" I asked.

"Whenever you're ready."

And there it was, right in my lap, and I didn't know what to do with it.

"What about now?" I said.

He was silent. He lit a cigarette, I think to buy time.

I did the same.

"Okay," he finally said. "When's the last time you've been back?"

"It's been so damn long," I told him, "that I'm not even sure I remember the way."

"All right," he said, "then we're going to have to go away before we can come back. How much gas have you got?"

"Three-quarters of a tank."

"Then turn left at the next corner, and we'll see what happens."

I did this thing, and as we drove along all the sidewalks began to sparkle.

"Damn!" he said. "It's been around twenty years since I've taken the walk. I'm remembering the right things too soon."

We kept driving, and I kept wondering what the hell was happening. The sky had grown a bit greenish, then shaded over into pink.

I bit my lip against the asking of questions.

We passed beneath a bridge and when we emerged on the other

side the sky was a normal color again, but there were windmills all over the place, big yellow ones.

"Don't worry," he said quickly, "it could be worse." I noticed that the people we passed were dressed rather strangely, and the roadway was of brick.

"Turn right"

I did.

Purple clouds covered over the sun, and it began to rain. Lightning stalked the heavens and the skies grumbled above us. I had the windshield wipers going full speed, but they weren't doing a whole lot of good. I turned on the headlights and slowed even more.

I would have sworn I'd passed a horseman, racing in the other direction, dressed all in gray, collar turned high and head lowered against the rain.

Then the clouds broke themselves apart and we were riding along a seashore. The waves splashed high and enormous gulls swept low above them. The rain had stopped and I killed the lights and the wipers. Now the road was of macadam, but I didn't recognize the place at all. In the rear-view mirror there was no sign of the town we had just departed. My grip tightened upon the wheel as we passed by a sudden gallows where a skeleton was suspended by the neck, pushed from side to side by the wind.

Random just kept smoking and staring out of the window as our road turned away from the shore and curved round a hill. A grassy treeless plain swept away to our right and a row of hills climbed higher on our left. The sky by now was a dark but brilliant blue, like a deep, clear pool, sheltered and shaded. I did not recall having ever seen a sky like that before.

Random opened his window to throw away the butt, and an icy breeze came in and swirled around inside the car until he closed the window again. The breeze had a sea scent to it, salty and sharp.

"All roads lead to Amber," he said, as though it were an axiom.

Then I recalled what Flora had said the day before. I didn't want to sound like a dunce or a withholder of crucial information, but I had to tell him, for my sake as well as his own, when I realized what her statements implied.

"You know," I began, "when you called the other day and I answered the phone because Flora was out, I've a strong feeling she was trying to make it to Amber, and that she found the way blocked."

At this, he laughed.

"The woman has very little imagination," he replied. "Of course it would be blocked at a time like this. Ultimately, we'll be reduced to walking, I'm sure, and it will doubtless take all of our strength and ingenuity to make it, if we make it at all. Did she think she could walk

back like a princess in state, treading on flowers the whole way? She's a dumb bitch. She doesn't really deserve to live, but that's not for me to say, yet."

"Turn right at the crossroads," he decided.

What was happening? I knew he was in some way responsible for the exotic changes going on about us, but I couldn't determine how he was doing it, where he was getting us to. I knew I had to learn his secret, but I couldn't just ask him or he'd know I didn't know. Then I'd be at his mercy. He seemed to do nothing but smoke and stare, but coming up out of a dip in the road we entered a blue desert and the sun was now pink above our heads within the shimmering sky. In the rear-view mirror, miles and miles of desert stretched out behind us, for as far as I could see. Neat trick, that.

Then the engine coughed, sputtered, steadied itself, repeated the performance.

The steering wheel changed shape beneath my hands.

It became a crescent; and the seat seemed further back, the car seemed closer to the road, and the windshield had more of a slant to it.

I said nothing, though, not even when the lavender sandstorm struck us.

But when it cleared away, I gasped.

There was a godawful line of cars all jammed up, about half a mile before us. They were all standing still and I could hear their horns.

"Slow down," he said. "It's the first obstacle."

I did. And another grist of sand swept over us.

Before I could switch on the lights, it was gone, and I blinked my eyes several times.

All the cars were gone and silent their horns. But the roadway sparkled now as the sidewalks had for a time, and I heard Random damning someone or something under his breath.

"I'm sure I shifted just the way he wanted us to, whoever set up that block," he said. "and it pisses me off that I did what he expected-the obvious."

"Eric?" I asked,

"Probably. What do you think we should do? Stop and try it the hard way for a while, or go on and see if there are more blocks?"

"Let's go on a bit. After all, that was only the first,"

"Okay." he said, but added, "who knows what the second will be?"

The second was a thing-I don't know how else to describe it.

It was a thing that looked like a smelter with arms, squatting in the middle of the road, reaching down and picking up cars, eating them.

I hit the brakes.

"What's the matter?" Random asked. "Keep going. How else can we get past them?"

"It shook me a bit," I said, and he gave me a strange, sidelong look as another dust storm came up.

It had been the wrong thing to say, I knew.

When the dust cleared away, we were racing along an empty road once more. And there were towers in the distance.

"I think I've screwed him up." said Random. "I combined several into one, and I think it may be one he hasn't anticipated. After all, no one can cover all roads to Amber."

"True," I said, hoping to redeem myself from whatever faux pas had drawn that strange look.

I considered Random. A little, weak looking guy who could have died as easily as I on the previous evening.

What was his power? And what was all this talk of Shadows? Something told me that whatever Shadows were, we moved among them even now. How? It was something Random was doing, and since he seemed at rest physically, his hands in plain sight, I decided it was something he did with his mind. Again, how?

Well, I'd heard him speak of "adding" and "subtracting," as though the universe in which he moved were a big equation.

I decided-with a sudden certainty-that he was somehow adding and subtracting items to and from the world that was visible about us to bring us into closer and closer alignment with that strange place, Amber, for which he was solving.

It was something I'd once known how to do. And the key to it, I knew in a flash, was remembering Amber. But I couldn't.

The road curved abruptly, the desert ended, to give way to fields of tall, blue, sharp-looking grass. After a while, the terrain became a bit hilly, and at the foot of the third hill the pavement ended and we entered upon a narrow dirt road. It was hard-packed, and it wound its way among greater hills upon which small shrubs and bayonet like thistle bushes now began to appear.

After about half an hour of this, the hills went away, and we entered a forest of squat, big-boled trees with diamond-shaped leaves of autumn orange and purple.

A light rain began to fall, and there were many shadows. Pale mists arose from mats of soggy leaves. Off to the right somewhere, I heard a howl.

The steering wheel changed shape three more times, its latest version being an octagonal wooden affair. The car was quite tall now, and we had somewhere acquired a hood ornament in the shape of a flamingo. I refrained from commenting on these things, but

accommodated myself to whatever positions the seat assumed and new operating requirements the vehicle obtained. Random, however, glanced at the steering wheel just as another howl occurred, shook his head, and suddenly the trees were much higher, though festooned with hanging vines and something like a blue veiling of Spanish Moss, and the car was almost normal again. I glanced at the fuel gauge and saw that we had half a tank.

"We're making headway," my brother remarked, and I nodded.

The road widened abruptly and acquired a concrete surface. There were canals on both sides, full of muddy water. Leaves, small branches, and colored feathers glided along their surfaces.

I suddenly became lightheaded and a bit dizzy, but "Breathe slowly and deeply," said Random, before I could remark on it. "We're taking a short cut, and the atmosphere and the gravitation will be a bit different for a time. I think we've been pretty lucky so far, and I want to push it for all it's worth-get as close as we can, as quickly as we can."

"Good idea," I said.

"Maybe, maybe not," he replied, "but I think it's worth the garn-Look out!"

We were climbing a hill and a truck topped it and came barreling down toward us. It was on the wrong side of the road. I swerved to avoid it, but it swerved, too. At the very last instant, I had to go off the road, onto the soft shoulder to my left, and head close to the edge of the canal in order to avoid a collision.

To my right, the truck screeched to a halt. I tried to pull off the shoulder and back onto the road, but we were stuck in the soft soil.

Then I heard a door slam, and saw that the driver had climbed down from the right side of the cab, which meant that he probably was driving on the proper side of the road after all, and we were in the wrong. I was sure that nowhere in the States did traffic flow in a British manner, but I was certain by this time that we had long ago left the Earth that I knew.

The truck was a tanker. It said ZUNOCO on the side in big, blood-red letters, and beneath this was the motto "Wee covir the werld." The driver covered me with abuse, as I stepped out, rounded the car, and began apologizing. He was as big as I was, and built like a beer barrel, and he carried a jack handle in one hand.

"Look, I said I'm sorry," I told him. "What do you want me to do? Nobody got hurt and there was no damage."

"They shouldn't turn goddamn drivers like you loose on die road!" he yelled. "You're a friggin' menace!"

Random got out of the car then and said, "Mister, you'd better move along!" and he had a gun in his hand.

"Put that away," I told him, but he flipped the safety catch off and pointed.

The guy turned around and started to run, a look of fear widening his eyes and loosening his jaw.

Random raised the pistol and took careful aim at the man's back, and I managed to knock his arm to the side just as he pulled the trigger.

It scored the pavement and ricocheted away.

Random turned toward me and his face was almost white.

"You bloody fool!" he said. "That shot could have hit the tank!"

"It could also have hit the guy you were aiming at."

"So who the hell cares? We'll never pass this way again, in this generation. That bastard dared to insult a Prince of Amber! It was your honor I was thinking about."

"I can take care of my own honor," I told him, and something cold and powerful suddenly gripped me and answered, "for he was mine to kill, not yours, had I chosen," and a sense of outrage filled me.

He bowed his head then, as the cab door slammed and the truck took off down the road.

"I'm sorry, brother," he said. "I did not mean to presume. But it offended me to hear one of them speak to you in such a manner. I know I should have waited to let you dispose of him as you saw fit, or at least have consulted with you."

"Well, whatever," I told him, "let's get back onto the road and get moving, if we can."

The rear wheels were sunken up to their hubcaps, and as I stared at them, trying to decide the best way to go about things, Random called out, "Okay, I've got the front bumper. You take the rear and we'll carry it back to the road-and we'd better deposit it in the left lane."

He wasn't kidding.

He'd said something about lesser gravitation, but I didn't feel that light. I knew I was strong, but I had my doubts about being able to raise the rear end of a Mercedes.

But on the other hand, I had to try, since he seemed to expect it of me, and I couldn't tip him off as to any gaps in my memory.

So I stooped, squatted, grasped, and started to straighten my legs. With a sucking sound, the rear wheels freed themselves from the moist earth. I was holding my end of the car about two feet above the ground! It was heavy, damn! it was heavy!-but I could do it!

With each step that I took, I sank about six inches into the ground. But I was carrying it. And Random was doing the same with his end.

We set it down on the roadway, with a slight jouncing of springs.

Then I took off my shoes and emptied them, cleaned them with swatches of grass, wrung out my socks, brushed off the cuffs of my trousers, threw my footgear into the rear seat and climbed back into the front, bare footed.

Random jumped in, on the passenger's side, and said, "Look, I want to apologize again-"

"Forget it," I said. "It's over and done with."

"Yes, but I don't want you to hold it against me."

"I won't," I told him. "Just curb your impetuosity in the future, when it involves life-taking in my presence."

"I will," he promised.

"Then let's get rolling," and we did.

We moved through a canyon of rocks, then passed through a city which seemed to be made entirely of glass, or glass-like substance, of tall buildings, thin and fragile-appearing, and of people through whom the pink sun shone, revealing their internal organs and the remains of their last meals. They stared at us as we drove by. They mobbed the corners of their streets, but no one attempted to halt us or pass in front of us.

"The Charles Forts of this place will doubtless quote this happening for many years," said my brother.

I nodded.

Then there was no roadway whatsoever, and we were driving across what seemed an eternal sheet of silicon. After a while it narrowed and became our road, and after another while there were marshes to our left and our right, low, brown, and stinking. And I saw what I'd swear to be a Diplodocus raise its head and stare down upon us. Then, overhead, an enormous bat-winged shape passed by. The sky was now a royal blue, and the sun was of fallow gold.

"We've now got less than a quarter tank of gas," I commented.

"Okay," said Random, "stop the car."

I did this and waited.

For a long time-like maybe six minutes-he was silent, then, "Drive on," he said.

After about three miles we came to a barricade of logs and I began driving around it. A gate occurred on one side, and Random told me, "Stop and blow your horn."

I did so. and after a time the wooden gate creaked upon its huge iron hinges and swung inward.

"Go on in." he said. "It's safe."

I drove in, and off to my left were three bubble-headed Esso pumps, the small building behind them being one of the kind I had seen countless times before, under more ordinary circumstances. I pulled up before one of the pumps and waited.

The guy who emerged from the building was about five feet tall, of enormous girth, with a strawberry-like nose, and his shoulders maybe a yard across.

"What'll it be?" he asked. "Fill 'er up?"

I nodded. "With regular," I said.

"Pull it up a bit," he directed.

I did, and asked Random, "Is my money any good here?"

"Look at it," he told me, and I did.

My wallet was stuffed with orange and yellow bills1 Roman numerals in their corners, followed by the letters "D.R."

He grinned at me as I examined the sheaf.

"See, I've taken care of everything," he said.

"Great. By the way, I'm getting hungry."

We looked around us, and we saw a picture of a gent who sells Kentucky Fried Chicken in another place, staring down at us from a big sign.

Strawberry Nose sloshed a little on the ground to make it come out even, hung up the hose, approached, and said, "Eight Drachae Regums."

I found an orange note with a "V D.R." on it and three more with "I D.R." and passed them to him.

"Thanks," he said, and stuffed them in his pocket. "Check your oil and water?"

"Yeah."

He added a little water, told me the oil level was okay, and smeared the windshield a bit with a dirty rag. Then he waved and walked back into the shack

We drove over to Kenni Roi's and got us a bucket full of Kentucki Fried Lizzard Partes and another bucket of weak, salty tasting beer.

Then we washed up in the outbuilding, beeped the horn at the gate, and waited till a man with a halberd hanging over his right shoulder came and opened it for us.

Then we hit the road again.

A tyrannosaurus leaped before us, hesitated for a moment, then went on his way, off to the left. Three more pterodactyls passed overhead.

"I am loath to relinquish Amber's sky," said Random, whatever that meant, and I grunted back at him.

"I'm afraid to try it all at once, though," he continued. "We might be torn to bits."

"Agreed," I agreed.

"But on the other hand, I don't like this place."

I nodded, so we drove on, till the silicon plain ended and bare rock lay all about us.

"What are you doing now?" I ventured.

"Now that I've got the sky, I'm going to try for the terrain," he said.

And the rock sheet became rocks, as we drove along. There was bare, black earth between, After a while, there was more earth and fewer rocks. Finally, I saw splotches of green. First a bit of grass here and there. But it was a very, very bright green, of a kind like yet unlike that common on Earth as I knew it

Soon there was much of it.

After a time there were trees, spotted occasionally along our way.

Then there was a forest

And what a forest!

I had never seen trees such as this, mighty and majestic, of a deep, rich green, slightly tinged with gold. They towered, they soared. They were enormous pines, oaks, maples, and many others which I could not distinguish. Through them crept a breeze of fantastic and lovely fragrance, when I cracked the window a bit. I decided to open it all the way and leave it like that after I'd had a few whiffs.

"The Forest of Arden," said the man who was my brother. and I knew he was right, and somehow I both loved and envied him for his wisdom, his knowledge.

"Brother," said I, "you're doing all right. Better than I'd expected. Thank you."

This seemed to take him somewhat aback. It was as if he'd never received a good word from a relative before.

"I'm doing my best," he said, "and I'll do it all the way, I promise. Look at it! We've got the sky, and we've got the forest! It's almost too good to be true! We've passed the halfway point, and nothing's bugged us especially. I think we're very fortunate. Will you give me a Regency?"

"Yes." I said, not knowing what it meant, but willing to grant it. if it lay within my powers.

He nodded then and said, "You're okay."

He was a homicidal little fink, who I recalled had always been sort of a rebel. Our parents had tried to discipline him in the past, I knew, never very successfully. And I realized. with that, that we had shared common parents, which I suddenly knew was not the case with me and Eric, me and Flora, me and Caine and Bleys and Fiona. And probably others, but these I'd recalled, I knew for sure.

We were driving on a bare, dirt roadway through a cathedral of enormous trees. It seemed to go on forever and ever. I felt safe in the place. Occasionally, startled a deer, surprised a fox crossing or standing near the road. In places, the way was marked with hoof prints. The sunlight was sometimes filtered through leaves, angling

like tight golden strings on some Hindu musical instrument. The breeze was moist and spoke of living things. It came to me that I knew this place, that I had ridden this road often in the past. I had ridden through the Forest of Arden on horseback, walked through it, hunted in it. lay on my back beneath some of those great boughs, my arms beneath my head, staring upward. I had climbed among the branches of some of those giants and looked down upon a green world, constantly shifting.

"I love this place." I said, only half realizing I had said it aloud. and Random replied. "You always did." and there might have been a trace of amusement in his voice. I couldn't be sure.

Then off in the distance I heard a note which I knew to be the voice of a hunting born.

"Drive faster," said Random suddenly. "That sounds to be Julian's horn"

I obeyed.

The horn sounded again, nearer.

"Those damn hounds of his will tear this car to pieces, and his birds will feed on our eyes!" he said. "I'd hate to meet him when he's this well prepared. Whatever he hunts, I know he'd willingly relinquish it for quarry such as two of his brothers."

"'Live and let live' is my philosophy these days," I remarked.

Random chuckled.

"What a quaint notion. I'll bet it will last all of five minutes."

Then the horn sounded again, even nearer, and he remarked, "Damn!"

The speedometer said seventy-five, in quaint, runic numerals, and I was afraid to go any faster on that road,

And the horn sounded again, much nearer now, three long notes, and I could hear the baying of hounds, off to the left.

"We are now very near to the real Earth, though still far from Amber," said my brother. "It will be futile to run through adjacent Shadows, for if it is truly us that he follows. he will pursue us. Or his shadow will."

"What shall we do?"

"Speed. and hope it is not us that be follows."

And the horn sounded once again, almost next to us this time.

"What the hell is be riding, a locomotive?" I asked.

"I'd say he is riding the mighty Morgenstern, the fastest horse he has ever created."

I let that last word roIl around in my head for a while, wondering at it and wondering at it. Yes, it was true, some inner voice told me. He did create Morgenstern, out of Shadows, fusing into the beast the strength and speed of a hurricane and a pile driver.

I remembered that I had call to fear that animal, and then I saw him.

Morgenstern was six hands higher than any other horse I'd ever seen. and his eyes were the dead color of a Weimaraner dog's and his coat was a light gray and his hooves looked like polished steel. He raced along like the wind, pacing the car, and Julian was crouched in his saddle-the Julian of the playing card, long black hair and bright blue eyes. and he had on his scaled white armor.

Julian smiled at us and waved, and Morgenstern tossed his head and his magnificent mane rippled in the wind, like a flag. His legs were a blur.

I recalled that Julian had once had a man wear my castoff garments and torment the beast. This was why it had tried to trample me on the day of a hunt, when I'd dismounted to skin a buck before it.

I'd rolled the window shut once more. so I didn't think it could tell by scent that I was inside the car. But Julian had spotted me, and I thought I knew what that meant. All about him ran the Storm Hounds, with their tough, tough bodies and their teeth like steel. They too had come Out of Shadow, for no normal dog could run like that. But I knew, for a certainty, that the word "normal" did not really apply to anything in this place.

Julian signaled us to stop then, and I glanced at Random and he nodded. "If we don't, he'll just run us down," he said. So I hit the brakes, slowed, stopped.

Morgenstern reared, pawed the air, struck the earth with all four hooves and cantered over. The dogs milled about, their tongues hanging out their sides heaving. The horse was covered with a glistening sheen that I knew to be perspiration.

"What a surprise!" said Julian, in his slow, almost impeded way of speaking and a great hawk that was black and green circled and settled upon his left shoulder.

"Yes, isn't it," I replied. "How have you been?"

"Oh, capital," he decided, "as always. What of yourself and brother Random?"

"I'm in good shape," I said, and Random nodded and remarked, "I thought you'd be indulging in other sports at a time like this."

Julian tipped his head and regarded him crookedly, through the windshield.

"I enjoy slaughtering beasts," he said, "and I think of my relatives constantly."

A slight coldness worked its way down my back.

"I was distracted from my hunt by the sound of your motor vehicle," he said. "At the time, I did not expect it to contain two such as you. I'd assume you are not simply riding for pleasure, but have a

destination in mind, such as Amber. True?"

"True," I agreed. "May I inquire why you are here, rather than there?"

"Eric set me to watching this road," be replied, and my hand came to rest upon one of the pistols in my belt as he spoke. I had a feeling a bullet couldn't breach that armor. though. I considered shooting Morgenstern.

"Well, brothers," he said, smiling, "I welcome you back and I wish you a good journey. I'll doubtless see you shortly in Amber. Good afternoon," and with that he turned and rode toward the woods.

"Let's get the hell out of here," said Random. "He's probably planning an ambush or a chase," and with this he drew a pistol from his belt and held it in his lap.

I drove on at a decent speed.

After about five minutes, when I was just beginning to breathe a bit easily, I heard the horn. I pushed down on the gas pedal. Knowing that he'd catch us anyhow, but trying to buy as much time and gain as much distance as I could. We skidded around corners and roared up hills and through dales. I almost hit a deer at one point, but we made it around the beast without cracking up or slowing.

The horn sounded nearer now, and Random was muttering obscenities.

I had the feeling that we still had quite a distance to go within the forest, and this didn't hearten me a bit.

We hit one long straight stretch, where I was able to floor it for almost a minute. Julian's horn notes grew more distant at that time. But we then entered a section where the road wound and twisted and I had to slow down. He began to gain on us at once again.

After about six minutes, he appeared in the rear-view mirror, thundering along the road, his pack all around him, baying and slavering.

Random rolled down his window, and after a minute he leaned out and began to fire.

"Damn that armor!" be said. "I'm sure I hit him twice and nothing's happened."

"I hate the thought of killing that beast," I said, "but try for the horse."

"I already have, several times," he said, tossing his empty pistol to the floor and drawing the other, "and either I'm a lousier shot than I thought, or it's true what they say: that it will take a silver bullet to kill Morgenstern."

He picked off six of the dogs with his remaining rounds, but there were still about two dozen left.

I passed him one of my pistols, and he accounted for five more of

the beasts.

"I'll save the last round," he said, "for Julian's head, if he gets close enough!"

They were perhaps fifty feet behind me at that point, and gaining, so I slammed on the brakes. Some of the dogs couldn't halt in time, but Julian was suddenly gone and a dark shadow passed overhead.

Morgenstern had leaped over the car. He wheeled then, and as horse and rider turned to face us I gunned the engine and the car sped forward.

With a magnificent leap, Morgenstern got them out of the way. In the rear-view mirror, I saw two dogs drop a fender they'd torn loose and renew the pursuit. Some were lying in the road, and there were about fifteen or sixteen giving chase.

"Good show," said Random, "but you're lucky they didn't go for the tires. They've probably never hunted a car before."

I passed him my remaining pistol, and "Get more dogs," I said.

He fired deliberately and with perfect accuracy, accounting for six.

And Julian was beside the car now, a sword in his right hand.

I blew the horn, hoping to spook Morgenstern, but it didn't work. I swerved toward them, but the horse danced away. Random crouched low in his seat and aimed past me. his right hand holding the pistol and resting upon his left forearm.

"Don't fire yet," I said. "I'm going to try to take him."

"You're crazy," he told me, as I hit the brakes again.

He lowered his weapon, though.

As soon as we came to a halt, I flung open my door and leaped out-barefooted yet! Damn it.

I ducked beneath his blade, seized his arm, and hurled him from the saddle. He struck me one on the head with his mailed left fist, and there were Roman candles going off all around me and a terrible pain.

He lay where he had fallen, being groggy, and there were dogs all around me, biting me, and Random kicking them. I snatched up Julian's blade from where it lay and touched his throat with its point.

"Call them off!" I cried. "Or I'll nail you to the ground!"

He screamed orders at the dogs and they drew back. Random was holding Morgenstern's bridle and struggling with the horse.

"Now, dear brother, what do you have to say for yourself?" I asked.

There was a cold blue fire within his eyes, and his face was without expression.

"If you're going to kill me, be about it," he said.

"In my own good time," I told him, somehow enjoying the sight of dirt on his impeccable armor. "In the meantime, what is your life

worth to you?"

"Anything I've got, of course."

I stepped back.

"Get up and get into the back seat of the car", I told him.

He did this thing, and I took away his dagger before he got in. Random resumed his own seat, and kept his pistol with the single remaining round aimed at Julian's head.

"Why not just kill him?" he asked.

"I think he'll he useful," I said. "There is much that I wish to know. And there is still a long way to travel."

I began to drive, I could see the dogs milling around. Morgenstern began cantering along after the car.

"I'm afraid I won't be worth much to you as a prisoner," Julian observed. "Although you will torture me, I can only tell you what I know, and that isn't much."

"Start with that then," I said.

"Eric looks to have the strongest position," he told us, "having been right there in Amber when the whole thing broke loose. At least this is the way I saw it, so I offered him my support. Had it been one of you, I'd probably have done the same thing. Eric charged me with keeping guard in Arden, since it's one of the main routes. Gerard controls the southern seaways, and Caine is off in the northern waters."

"What of Benedict?" Random asked.

"I don't know. I haven't heard anything. He might be with Bleys. He might be off somewhere else in Shadow and not even have heard of this thing yet. He might even be dead. It's been years since we've heard from him."

"How many men have you got in Arden," asked Random.

"Over a thousand," he said. "Some are probably watching you right now."

"And if they want you to go on living, that's all they'll do," said Random.

"You are doubtless correct," he replied. "I have to admit, Corwin did a shrewd thing in taking me prisoner rather than killing me. You just might make it through the forest this way."

"You're just saying that because you want to live," said Random.

"Of course I want to live. May I?"

"Why?"

"In payment for the information I've given you."

Random laughed.

"You've given us very little, and I'm sure more can be torn from you. We'll see, as soon as we get a chance to stop. Eh, Corwin?"

"We'll see," I said. "Where's Fiona?"

"Somewhere to the south, I think," Julian replied.

"How about Deirdre?"

"I don't know."

"LIewella?"

"In Rebma."

"Okay," I said, "I think you've told me everything you know."

"I have."

We drove on in silence, and finally the forest began to thin. I'd lost sight of Morgenstern long ago, though I sometimes saw Julian's falcon pacing us. The road took a turn upward, and we were heading toward a pass between two purple mountains. The gas tank was a little better than a quarter full. Within an hour, we were passing between high shoulders of stone.

"This would be a good place to set up a road block," said Random.

"That sounds likely," I said. "What about it, Julian?"

He sighed.

"Yes." he agreed, "you should be coming upon one very soon. You know how to get by it."

We did. When we came to the gate, and the guard in green and brown leather, sword unsheathed, advanced upon us, I jerked my thumb toward the back seat and said, "Get the picture?"

He did, and he recognized us, also.

He hastened to raise the gate, and he saluted us as we passed by.

There were two more gates before we made it through the pass, and somewhere along the way it appeared we had lost the hawk. We had gained several thousand feet in elevation now, and I braked the car on a road that crawled along the face of a cliff. To our right hand, there was nothing other than a long way down.

"Get out," I said. "You're going to take a walk."

Julian paled.

"I won't grovel," he said. "I won't beg you for my life." And he got out.

"Hell," I said. "I haven't had a good grovel in weeks! Well . . . go stand by the edge there. A little closer please." And Random kept his pistol aimed at his head. "A while back." I told him, "you said that you would probably have supported anyone who occupied Eric's position."

"That's right."

"Look down."

He did. It was a long way.

"Okay." I said, "remember that, should things undergo a sudden change. And remember who it was who gave you your life where another would have taken it.

"Come on, Random. Let's get moving."

We left him standing there, breathing heavily, his brows woven

together.

We reached the top and were almost out of gas. I put it in neutral, killed the engine, and began the long roll down.

"I've been thinking," said Random; "you've lost none of your old guile. I'd probably have killed him, myself, for what he tried. But I think you did the right thing. I think he will throw us his support, if we can get an edge on Eric. In the meantime, of course, he'll report what happened to Eric."

"Of course," I said.

"And you have more reason to want him dead than any of us."

I smiled.

"Personal feelings don't make for good politics, legal decisions, or business deals."

Random lit two cigarettes and handed me one.

Staring downward through the smoke, I caught my first glimpse of that sea. Beneath the deep blue, almost night-time sky, with that golden sun hanging up there in it, the sea was so rich-thick as paint, textured like a piece of cloth, of royal blue, almost purple-that it troubled me to look upon it. I found myself speaking in a language that I hadn't realized I knew. I was reciting "The Ballad of the Water-Crossers," and Random listened until I had finished and asked me, "It has often been said that you composed that. Is it true?"

"It's been so long," I told him, "that I don't really remember any more."

And as the cliff curved further and further to the left, and as we swung downward across its face, heading toward a wooded valley, more and more of the sea came within our range of vision.

"The Lighthouse of Catba," said Random, gesturing toward an enormous gray tower that rose from the waters, mucs Out to sea. "I had all but forgotten it."

"And I," I replied. "It is a very strange feeling, coming back," and I realized then that we were no longer speaking English, but the language called Thari.

After almost half an hour, we reached the bottom. I kept coasting for as far as I could, then turned on the engine. At its sound, a flock of dark birds heat its way into the air from the shrubbery off to the left. Something gray and wolfish-looking broke from cover and dashed toward a nearby thicket; the deer it had been stalking, invisible till then, bounded away. We were in a lush valley, though not so thickly or massively wooded as the Forest of Arden, which sloped gently but steadily toward the distant sea.

High, and climbing higher on the left, the mountains reared. The further we advanced into the valley, the better came our view of the nature and full extent of that massive height of rock down one of

whose lesser slopes we had coasted. The mountains continued their march to the sea, growing larger as they did so, and taking upon their shoulders a shifting mantle tinged with green, mauve, purple, gold, and indigo. The face they turned to the sea was invisible to us from the valley, but about the back of that final, highest peak swirled the faintest veil of ghost clouds, and occasionally the golden sun touched it with fire. I judged we were about thirty-five miles from the place of light, and the fuel gauge read near empty. I knew that the final peak was our destination. and an eagerness began to grow up within me. Random was staring in the same direction.

"lt's still there," I remarked.

"I'd almost forgotten," he said.

And as I shifted gears, I noticed that my trousers had taken on a certain sheen which they had not possessed before. Also, they were tapered considerably as they reached toward my ankles, and I noted that my cuffs had vanished. Then I noticed my shirt.

It was more like a jacket. and it was black and trimmed with silver; and my belt had widened considerably.

On closer inspection, I saw that there was a silver line down the outer seams of my pants legs.

"I find myself garbed effectively," I observed, to see what that wrought.

Random chuckled, and I saw then that he had some where acquired brown trousers streaked with red and a shirt of orange and brown. A brown cap with a yellow border rested on the Seat beside him.

"I was wondering when you'd notice," he said. "How do you feel?"

"Quite good," I told him, "and by the way, we're almost out of gas."

"Too late to do much about that," he said. "We are now in the real world, and it would be a horrible effort to play with Shadows. Also, it would not go unnoticed. I'm afraid we'll have to hoof it when this gives out."

It gave out two and a half miles later. I coasted off to the side of the road and stopped. The sun by now was westering farewell, and the shadows had grown long indeed.

I reached into the back seat, where my shoe's had become black boots, and something rattled as my hand groped after them.

I drew forth a moderately heavy silver sword and scabbard. The scabbard fit my belt perfectly. There was also a black cloak, with a clasp like a silver rose.

"Had you thought them lost forever?" asked Random.

"Damn near." said I.

We climbed out of the car and began walking. The evening was

cool and briskly fragrant. There were stars in the east already, and the sun was diving toward its bed.

We trudged along the road, and Random said:

"I don't feel right about this."

"What do you mean?"

"Things have gone too easily, thus far," he told me. "I don't like it. We made it all the way through to the Forest of Arden with barely a hitch. True, Julian tried to take care of us there-but I don't know. . . We've made it so very far so readily that I'd almost suspect we were permitted to do it."

"This thought has also crossed my mind," I lied. "What do you think it portends?"

"I fear," said he, "that we are walking into a trap."

We walked on for several minutes in silence.

Then "Ambush?" said I. "These woods seem strangely still."

"I don't know."

We made maybe two miles, and then the sun was gone. The night was black and studded with brilliant stars.

"This is no way for two such as we to move," Random said.

"True."

"Yet I fear to fetch us steeds."

"And I, also."

"What is your assessment of the situation?" Random asked.

"Death and dreck," said I. "I feel they may be upon us soon."

"Do you think we should abandon the roadway?"

"I've been thinking about it," I lied again, "and I don't see that it would hurt any for us to walk off to the side a bit."

So we did.

We passed among trees, we moved past the dark shapes of rocks and bushes. And the moon slowly rose, big, of silver, and lighting up the night.

"I am taken by this feeling that we cannot do it," Random told me.

"And what reliance can we give this feeling?" I asked.

"Much."

"Why?"

"Too far and too fast," he responded. "I don't like it at all. Now we're in the real world, it is too late to turn back. We cannot play with Shadows, but must rely on our blades." (He wore a short, burnished one himself.) "I feel, therefore. that it is perhaps Eric's will that we have advanced to this point. There is nothing much to do about it now, but now we're here, I wish we'd had to battle for every inch of the way.

We continued for another mile and paused for cigarettes, which we held cupped in our hands.

"It's a lovely night," I said, to Random and the cooI breeze. "I suppose.... What was that?"

There was a soft rustling of shrubbery a bit of a way behind us.

"Some animal, maybe."

His blade was in his band.

We waited, several minutes, but nothing more was heard.

So he sheathed it and we started walking again.

There were no more sounds from behind us, but after a time I heard something from up ahead.

He nodded when I glanced at him, and we began to move more cautiously.

There was a soft glow, as from a campfire, away, far, in the distance.

We heard no more sounds, but his shrug showed acquiescence to my gesture as I headed toward it, into the woods, to the right.

It was the better part of an hour before we struck the camp. There were four men seated about the fire and two sleeping off in the shadows. The girl who was bound to a stake had her head turned away from us, but I felt my heart quicken as I looked upon her form.

"Could that be ...?" I whispered.

"Yes." he replied. "I think it may."

Then she turned her head and I knew it was.

"Deirdre!"

"I wonder what the bitch has been up to?" Random said. "From those guys' colors, I'd venture they're taking her back to Amber."

I saw that they wore black, red, and silver, which I remembered from the Trumps and from somewhere else to be the colors of Eric.

"Since Eric wants her, he can't have her," I said.

"I never much cared for Deirdre," Random said, "but I know you do, so.." and he unsheathed his blade.

I did the same. "Get ready," I told him, rising into a crouch. And we rushed them. Maybe two minutes, that's about what it took,

She was watching us by then, the firelight making her face into a twisted mask. She cried and laughed and said our names, in a loud and frightened voice, and I slashed her bonds and helped her to her feet.

"Greetings, sister. Will you join us on the Road to Amber?"

"No," she said. "Thanks for my life, but I want to keep it. Why do you walk to Amber, as if I didn't know."

"There is a throne to be won," said Random, which was news to me. "and we are interested parties."

"If you're smart, you'll stay away and live longer," she said. and God! she was lovely, though a bit tried-looking and dirty.

I took her into my arms because I wanted to, and squeezed her.

Random found a skin of wine and we all had a drink.

"Eric is the only Prince in Amber," she said, "and the troops are loyal to him."

"I'm not afraid of Eric," I replied, and I knew I wasn't certain about that statement.

"He'll never let you into Amber," she said. "I was a prisoner myself, till I made it out one of the secret ways two days ago. I thought I could walk in Shadows till all things were done, but it is not easy to begin this close to the real place. So his troops found me this morning. They were taking me back. I think he might have killed me, had I been returned-though I'm not sure. At any rate, I'd have remained a puppet in the city. I think Eric may be mad, but again, I'm not sure."

"What of Bleys?" Random inquired.

"He sends things out of the Shadows, and Eric is greatly disturbed. But he has never attacked with his real force, and so Eric is troubled, and the disposition of the Crown and Scepter remains uncertain, though Eric holds the one in his right hand."

"I see. Has he ever spoken of us?"

"Not of you, Random. But of Corwin, yes. He still fears the return of Corwin to Amber. There is relative safety for perhaps five more miles-but beyond that, every step of the way is studded with peril. Every tree and rock is a booby trap and an ambush. Because of Bleys and because of Corwin. He wanted you to get at least this far, so that you could not work with Shadows nor easily escape his power. It is absolutely impossible for either of you to enter into Amber without falling into one of his traps."

"Yet you escaped...."

"That was different. I was trying to get out, not in. Perhaps he did not guard me so carefully as he would one of you, because of my sex and my lack of ambition. And nevertheless, as you can see, I did not succeed."

"You have now, sister," I said, "so long as my blade is free to swing on your behalf," and she kissed my brow and squeezed my hand. I was always a sucker for that.

"I'm sure we're being followed," said Random, and with a gesture the three of us faded into the darkness.

We lay still beneath a bush, keeping watch on our trail.

After a time, our whispers indicated that there was a decision for me to make. The question was really quite simple: What next?

The question was too basic, and I couldn't stall any more. I knew I couldn't trust them, even dear Deirdre, but if I had to level with anybody, Random was at least in this thing with me, up to his neck, and Detrdre was my favorite.

"Beloved relatives," I told them, "I've a confession to make," and Random's hand was already on the hilt of his blade. That's how far we could trust one another. I could already hear his mind clicking: Corwin brought me here to betray me, he was saying to himself.

"If you brought me here to betray me," be said, "you won't take me back alive."

"Are you kidding?" I asked. "I want your help, not your head. What I have to say is just this: I don't know what the hell's going on. I've made some guesses, but I don't really know where the devil we are, what Amber is, or why we're crouched here in the bushes hiding from his troops," I told him, "or for that matter, who I am, really."

There was an awfully long silence, and then Random whispered, "What do you mean?"

"Yes," said Deirdre.

"I mean," I said, "that I managed to fool you, Random. Didn't you think it strange that all I did on this trip was drive the car?"

"You were the boss," he told me, "and I figured you were planning. You did some pretty shrewd things along the way. I know that you're Corwin."

"Which is a thing I only found out a couple of days ago, myself," I said. "I know that I am the one you call Corwin, but I was in an accident a while back. I had head injuries-I'll show you the scars when we've got more light-and I am suffering from amnesia. I don't dig all this talk about Shadows. I don't even remember much about Amber. All I remember is my relatives, and the fact that I can't trust them much. That's my story. What's to be done about it?"

"Christ!" said Random. "Yes, I can see it now! I understand all the little things that puzzled me along the way. How did you take Flora in so completely?"

"Luck," I said, "and subconscious sneakiness, I guess. No! That's not it! She was stupid. Now I really need you, though."

"Do you think we can make it into the Shadows," said Deirdre, and she was not speaking to me.

"Yes," said Random, "but I'm not for it. I'd like to see Corwin in Amber, and I'd like to see Eric's head on a pole. I'm willing to take a few chances to see these things, so I'm not turning back to the Shadows. You can if you want. You all think I'm a weakling and a bluff. Now you're going to find out. I'm going to see this through."

"Thanks, brother," I said.

"Ill met by moonlight." said Deirdre.

"You could still be tied to a stake," said Random, and she did not reply.

We lay there a while longer and three men entered the campsite and looked about. Then two of them bent down and sniffed at the

ground.

Then they looked in our direction.

"Weir," whispered Random, as they moved in our direction.

I saw it happen, though only in shadow. They dropped to all fours and the moonlight played tricks with their gray garments. Then there were the six blazing eyes of our stalkers.

I impaled the first wolf on my silver blade and there was a human howl. Random beheaded one with a single blow, and to my amazement, I saw Deirdre raise one in the air and break its back across her knee with a brittle, snapping sound.

"Quick, your blade," said Random, and I ran his victim through, and hers, and there were more cries.

"We'd better move fast," said Random. "This way!" and we followed.

"Where are we going?" asked Deirdre, after perhaps an hour of furtive movement through the undergrowth.

"To the sea," he replied.

"Why?"

"It holds Corwin's memory."

"Where? How?"

"Rebma, of course."

"They'd kill you there and feed your brains to the fishes."

"I'm not going the full distance. You'll have to take over at the shore and talk with your sister's sister."

"You mean for him to take the Pattern again?"

"Yes."

"It's risky."

"I know. Listen. Corwin," he said, "you've been decent enough with me recently. If by some chance you're not really Corwin, you're dead. You've got to be, though. You can't be someone else. Not from the way you've operated, without memory even. No, I'll bet your life on it. Take a chance and try the thing called the Pattern. Odds are, it'll restore your memory. Are you game?"

"Probably," I said, "but what is the Pattern?"

"Rebma is the ghost city." be told me. "It is the reflection of Amber within the sea. In it, everything in Amber is duplicated, as in a mirror. Llewella's people live there, and dwell as though in Amber. They hate me for a few past peccadilloes, so I cannot venture there with you, but if you would speak them fair and perhaps hint at your mission, I feel they would let you walk the Pattern of Rebma, which, while it is the reverse of that in Amber, should have the same effect. That is, it gives to a son of our father the power to walk among Shadows."

"How will this power help me?"

"It should make you to know what you are."

"Then I'm game." I said.

"Good man. In that case, we'll keep heading south. It will take several days to reach the stairway ... You will go with him, Deirdre?"

"I will go with my brother Corwin."

I knew she would say that, and I was glad. I was afraid, but I was glad.

We walked all that night. We avoided three parties of armed troops, and in the morning we slept in a cave.

Chapter 5

We spent two evenings making our way to the pink and sable sands of the great sea. It was on the morning of the third day that we arrived at the beach, having successfully avoided a small party the sundown before. We were loath to step out into the open until we had located the precise spot, Faiella-bionin, the Stairway to Rebma, and could cross quickly to it.

The rising sun cast billions of bright shards into the foaming swell of the waters, and our eyes were dazzled by their dance so that we could not see beneath the surface. We had lived on fruit and water for two days and I was ravenously hungry, but I forgot this as I regarded the wide, sloping tiger beach with its sudden twists and rises of coral, orange, pink, and red, and its abrupt caches of shells, driftwood, and small polished stones; and the sea beyond: rising and falling, splashing softly, all gold and blue and royal purple, and casting forth its lifesong breezes like benedictions beneath dawn's violet skies.

The mountain that faces the dawn, Kolvir, which has held Amber like a mother her child for all of time, stood perhaps twenty miles to our left, the north, and the sun covered her with gold and made rainbow the veil above the city. Random looked upon it and gnashed his teeth, then looked away. Maybe I did, too.

Deirdre touched my hand, gestured with her head, and began to walk toward the north, parallel to the shore. Random and I followed. She had apparently spotted some landmark.

We'd advanced perhaps a quarter of a mile, when it seemed that the earth shook lightly.

"Hoofbeats!" hissed Random.

"Look!" said Deirdre, and her head was tilted back and she was pointing upward.

My eyes followed the gesture.

Overhead a hawk circled.

"How much farther is it?" I asked.

"That cairn of stones," she said, and I saw it perhaps a hundred yards away, about eight feet in height, builded of head-sized, gray stones, worn by the wind, the sand, the water, standing in the shape of a truncated pyramid.

The hoofbeats came louder, and then there were the notes of a horn, not Julian's call, though.

"Run!" said Random, and we did.

After perhaps twenty-five paces, the hawk descended. It swooped at Random, but he had his blade out and took a cut at it. Then it turned its attention to Deirdre.

I snatched my own blade from its sheath and tried a cut. Feathers flew. It rose and dropped again, and this time my blade bit something hard-and I think it fell. but I couldn't tell for sure, because I wasn't about to stop and look back. The sound of boofbeats was quite steady now, and loud, and the horn notes were near at hand.

We reached the cairn and Deirdre turned at right angles to it and headed straight toward the sea.

I was not about to argue with someone who seemed to know what she was doing. I followed, and from the corner of my eye I saw the horsemen.

They were still off in the distance, but they were thundering along the beach, dogs barking and horns blowing, and Random and I ran like hell and waded out into the surf after our sister.

We were up to our waists when Random said, "It's death if I stay and death if I go on.

"One is imminent." I said, "and the other may be open to negotiation. Let's move!"

We did. We were on some sort of rocky surface which descended into the sea. I didn't know how we would breathe while we walked it, but Deirdre didn't seem worried about it, so I tried not to be.

But I was.

When the water swirled and swished about our heads, I was very worried. Deirdre walked straight ahead, though, descending, and I followed, and Random followed. Each few feet there was a drop. We were descending an enormous staircase, and it was named Faiella-bionin, I knew.

One more step would bring the water above my head, but Deirdre had already dropped below the water line.

So I drew a deep breath and took the plunge.

There were more steps and I kept following them. I wondered why my body was not naturally buoyed above them, for I continued to remain erect and each step bore me downward as though on a natural staircase, though my movements were somewhat slowed. I began wondering what I'd do when I could hold my breath no longer.

There were bubbles about Random's head, and Deirdre's. I tried to observe what they were doing, but I couldn't figure it. Their breasts seemed to be rising and falling in a normal manner.

When we were about ten feet beneath the surface, Random glanced at me from where he moved at my left side, and I heard his voice. It was as though I had my ear pressed against the bottom of a bathtub and each of his words came as the sound of someone kicking upon the side.

They were clear, though:

"I don't think they'll persuade the dogs to follow, even if the

horses do," he said.

"How are you managing to breathe?" I tried saying, and I heard my own words distantly.

"Relax," he said quickly. "If you're holding your breath, let it out and don't worry. You'll be able to breathe so long as you don't venture off the stairway."

"How can that be?" I asked.

"If we make it, you'll know," he said. and his voice had a ringing quality to it, through the cold and passing green.

We were about twenty feet beneath the surface by then, and I exhaled a small amount of air and tried inhaling for perhaps a second.

There was nothing disturbing about the sensation, so I protracted it. There were more bubbles, but beyond that I felt nothing uncomfortable in the transition.

There was no sense of increasing pressure during the next ten feet or so, and I could see the staircase on which we moved as though through a greenish fog. Down, down, down it led. Straight. Direct. And there was some kind of light coming from below us.

"If we can make it through the archway, we'll be safe," said my sister.

"You'll be safe," Random corrected, and I wondered what he had done to be despised in the place called Rebma.

"If they ride horses which have never made the journey before, then they'll have to follow on foot," said Random. "In that case, we'll make it."

"So they might not follow-if that is the case," said Deirdre.

We hurried.

By the time we were perhaps fifty feet below the surface, the waters grew quite dark and chill. But the glow before us and below us increased, and after another ten steps, I could make out the source:

There was a pillar rising to the right. At its top was something globe-like and glowing. Perhaps fifteen steps lower, another such formation occurred to the left. Beyond that, it seemed there was another one on the right, and so on.

When we entered the vicinity of the thing, the waters grew warmer and the stairway itself became clear: it was white, shot through with pink and green, and resembled marble but was not slippery despite the water. It was perhaps fifty feet in width, and there was a wide banister of the same substance on either side.

Fishes swam past us as we walked it. When I looked back over my shoulder, there seemed to be no sign of pursuit.

It became brighter. We entered the vicinity of the first light, and it wasn't a globe on the top of a pillar. My mind must have added that touch to the phenomenon, to try to rationalize it at least a bit. It

appeared to be a flame, about two feet in height, dancing there, as atop a huge torch. I decided to ask about it later, and saved my-if you'll excuse the expression-breath, for the rapid descent we were making.

After we had entered the alley of light and had passed six more of the torches, Random said, "They're after us," and I looked back again and saw distant figures descending, four of them on horseback.

It is a strange feeling to laugh under water and hear yourself.

"Let them," I said, and I touched the hilt of my blade, "for now we have made it this far, I feel a power upon me!"

We hurried though, and off to our left and to our right the water grew black as ink. Only the stairway was illuminated, in our mad flight down it, and distantly I saw what appeared to be a mighty arch.

Deirdre was leaping down the stairs two at a time, and there came a vibration now, from the staccato beat of the horses' hooves behind us.

The band of armed men-filling the way from banister to banister-was far behind and above. But the four horsemen had gained on us. We followed Deirdre as she rushed downward, and my hand stayed upon my blade.

Three, four, five. We passed that many lights before I looked back again and saw that the horsemen were perhaps fifty feet above us. The footmen were now almost out of sight. The archway loomed ahead, perhaps two hundred feet distant. Big, shining like alabaster, and carved with Tritons, sea nymphs, mermaids, and dolphins, it was. And there seemed to be people on the other side of it.

"They must wonder why we have come there," said Random.

"It will be an academic point if we don't make it," I replied, hurrying, as another glance revealed that the horsemen had gained ten feet on us.

I drew my blade then, and It flashed in the torchlight. Random followed suit.

After another twenty steps or so, the vibrations were terrible within the green and we turned, so as not to be cut down as we ran.

They were almost upon us. The gates lay a hundred feet to our back, and it might have been a hundred miles, unless we could take the four horsemen.

I crouched, as the man who was headed toward me swung his blade. There was another rider to his right and slightly to his rear, so naturally I moved to his left, near to the rail. This required that he strike cross-body, as he held his blade in his right hand.

When he struck, I parried in quarte and riposted.

He was leaning far forward in the saddle, and the point of my blade entered his neck on the right side.

A great billow of blood, like crimson smoke, arose and swirled within the greenish light. Crazily, I wished Van Gogh were there to see it.

The horse continued past, and I leaped at the second rider from the rear.

He turned to parry the stroke, succeeded. But the force of his speed through the water and the strength of my blow removed him from the saddle. As he fell, I kicked, and he drifted. I struck at him, hovering there above me, and he parried again, but this carried him beyond the rail. I heard him scream as the pressure of the waters came upon him. Then he was silent.

I turned my attention then to Random, who had slain both a horse and a man and was dueling with a second man on foot. By the time I reached them, he had slain the man and was laughing. The blood billowed above them, and I suddenly realized that I had known mad, sad, bad Vincent Van Gogh, and it was really too bad that he couldn't have painted this.

The footmen were perhaps a hundred feet behind us, and we turned and headed toward the arches. Deirdre had already passed through them.

We ran and we made it. There were many swords at our sides, and the footmen turned back. Then we sheathed our blades, and Random said, "I've had it," and we moved to join with the band of people who had stood to defend us.

Random was immediately ordered to surrender his blade, and he shrugged and handed it over. Then two men came and stood on either side of him and a third at his back, and we continued on down the stair.

I lost all sense of time in that watery place, but I feel that we walked for somewhere between a quarter of an hour and half an hour before we reached our destination.

The golden gates of Rebma stood before us. We passed through them. We entered the city.

Everything was to be seen through a green haze. There were buildings, all of them fragile and most of them high, grouped in patterns and standing in colors that entered my eyes and tore through my mind, seeking after remembrance. They failed, the sole result of their digging being the now familiar ache that accompanies the half recalled, the unrecalled. I had walked these streets before, however, that I knew, or ones very much like them.

Random had not said a single word since he had been taken into custody. Deirdre's only conversation had been to inquire after our sister Llewella. She had been informed that Liewella was in Rebma.

I examined our escort. They were men with green hair, purple

hair, and black hair, and all of them had eyes of green, save for one fellow whose were of a hazel color. All wore only scaled trunks and cloaks, cross-braces on their breasts, and short swords depending from seashell belts. All were pretty much lacking in body hair.

None of them spoke to me, though some stared and some glared, I was allowed to keep my weapon.

Inside the city, we were conducted up a wide avenue, lighted by pillar flames set at even closer intervals than on Faiella-bionin, and people stared out at us from behind octagonal, tinted windows, and bright-bellied fishes swam by. There came a cool current, like a breeze, as we turned a corner; and after a few steps, a warm one, like a wind.

We were taken to the palace in the center of the city, and I knew it as my hand knew the glove in my belt. It was an image of the palace of Amber, obscured only by the green and confused by the many strangely placed mirrors which had been set within its walls, inside and out. A woman sat upon the throne in the glassite room I almost recalled, and her hair was green, though streaked with silver, and her eyes were round as moons of jade and her brows rose like the wings of olive gulls. Her mouth was small, her chin was small; her cheeks were high and wide and rounded. A circlet of white gold crossed her brow and there was a crystal necklace about her neck. At its tip there flashed a sapphire between her sweet bare breasts, whose nipples were also a pale green. She wore scaled trunks of blue and a silver belt, and she held a scepter of pink coral in her right hand and had a ring upon every finger, and each ring had a stone of a different blue within it. She did not smile as she spoke:

"What seek you here, outcasts of Amber?" she asked, and her voice was a lisping, soft, flowing thing.

Deirdre spoke in reply, saying: "We flee the wrath of the prince who sits in the true city-Eric! To be frank, we wish to work his downfall. If he is loved here, we are lost, and we have delivered ourselves into the hands of our enemies. But I feel he is not loved here. So we come asking aid, gentle Moire-"

"I will not give you troops to assault Amber." she replied. "As you know, the chaos would be reflected within my own realm."

"That is not what we would have of you, dear Moire," Deirdre continued, "but only a small thing, to be achieved at no pain or cost to yourself or your subjects."

"Name it! For as you know, Eric is almost as disliked here as this recreant who stands at your left hand," and with this she gestured at my brother, who stared at her in frank and insolent appraisal, a small smile playing about the corners of his lips.

If he was going to pay-whatever the price-for whatever he had

done, I could see that he would pay it like a true prince of Amber-as our three dead brothers had done ages ago, I suddenly recalled. He would pay it, mocking them the while, laughing though his mouth was filled with the blood of his body, and as he died he would pronounce an irrevocable curse which would come to pass. I, too, had this power, I suddenly knew, and I would use it if circumstances required its use.

"The thing I would ask," she said, "is for my brother Corwin, who is also brother to the Lady LIewella, who dwells here with you. I believe that he has never given you offense. . . ."

"That is true. But why does he not speak for himself?"

"That is a part of the problem, Lady. He cannot, for he does, not know what to ask. Much of his memory has departed, from an accident which occurred when he dwelled among Shadows. It is to restore his remembrance that we have come here, to bring back his recollection of the old days, that he might oppose Eric in Amber."

"Continue," said the woman on the throne, regarding me through the shadows of her lashes on her eyes.

"In a place in this building," she said, "there is a room where few would go. In that room," she continued, "upon the floor, traced in fiery outline, there lies a duplicate of the thing we call the

Pattern. Only a son or daughter of Amber's late liege may walk this Pattern and live; and it gives to such a person a power over Shadow." Here Moire blinked several times, and I speculated as to the number of her subjects she had sent upon that path, to gain some control of this power for Rebma. Of course, she had failed. "To walk the Pattern," Deirdre went on, "should, we feel, restore to Corwin his memory of himself as a prince of Amber. He cannot go to Amber to do it, and this is the only place I know where it is duplicated, other than Tir-na Nog'th, where of course we may not go at this time."

Moire turned her gaze upon my sister, swept it over Random, returned it to me.

"Is Corwin willing to essay this thing?" she asked.

I bowed.

"Willing, m'lady," I said, and she smiled then.

"Very well, you have my permission. I can guarantee you no guarantees of safety beyond my realm, however."

"As to that, your majesty," said Deirdre, "we expect no boons, but will take care of it ourselves upon our departure."

"Save for Random," she said, "who will be quite safe."

"What mean you?" asked Deirdre, for Random would not. of course, speak for himself under the circumstances.

"Surely you recall, she said, "that one time Prince Random came into my realm as a friend, and did thereafter depart in haste with my

daughter Morganthe."

"I have heard this said. Lady Moire, but I am not aware of the truth or the baseness of the tale."

"It is true," said Moire, "and a month thereafter was she returned to me. Her suicide came some months after the birth of her son Martin. What have you to say to that, Prince Random?"

"Nothing," said Random.

"When Martin came of age," said Moire, "because he was of the blood of Amber, he determined to walk the Pattern. He is the only one of my people to have succeeded. Thereafter, he walked in Shadow and I have not seen him since. What have you to say to that, Lord Random?"

"Nothing," Random replied.

"Therefore, I will punish thee," Moire continued. "You shall marry the woman of my choice and remain with her in my realm for a year's time, or you will forfeit your life. What say you to that, Random?"

Random said nothing, but he nodded abruptly.

She stuck her scepter upon the arm of her turquoise throne.

"Very well," she said. "So be it"

And so it was.

We repaired to the chambers she had granted us, there to refresh ourselves. Subsequently she appeared at the door of my own,

"Hail, Moire," I said.

"Lord Corwin of Amber," she told me, "often have I wished to meet thee."

"And I thee," I lied.

"Your exploits are legend."

"Thank you, but I barely recall the high points."

"May I enter here?"

"Certainly," and I stepped aside.

She moved into the well-appointed suite she had granted me, She seated herself upon the edge of the orange couch.

"When would you like to essay the Pattern?"

"As soon as possible," I told her.

She considered this, then said, "Where have you been, among Shadows?"

"Very far from here," I said, "in a place that I learned to love."

"It is strange that a lord of Amber should have this capacity."

"What capacity?"

"To love," she replied.

"Perhaps I chose the wrong word."

"I doubt it," she said, "for the ballads of Corwin do touch upon the strings of the heart."

"The lady is kind."

"But not wrong," she replied.

"I'll give you a ballad one day."

"What did you do when you dwelled in Shadow?"

"It occurs to me that I was a professional soldier, madam. I fought for whoever would pay me. Also. I composed the words and music to many popular songs."

"Both these things occur to me as logical and natural."

"Pray tell me. what of my brother Random?"

"He will marry with a girl among my subjects who is named Vialle. She is blind and has no wooers among our kind."

"Are you certain," said I, "that you do the best thing for her?"

"She will obtain good status In this manner," said Moire, "though he depart after a year and never return.

For whatever else may be said of him, be is a prince of Amber."

"What if she comes to love him?"

"Could anyone really do this thing?"

"In my way, I love him, as a brother."

"Then this is the first time a son of Amber has ever said such a thing, and I attribute it to your poetic temperament."

"Whatever," said I, "be very sure that it is the best thing for the girl."

"I have considered it," she told me, "and I am certain. She will recover from whatever pain he inflicts, and after his departure she will be a great lady of my court."

"So may it be," I said, and looked away, feeling a sadness come over me-for the girl, of course.

"What may I say to you?" I said. "Perhaps you do a good thing. I hope so." And I took her hand and kissed it.

"You. Lord Corwin, are the only prince of Amber I might support," she told me. "save possibly for Benedict. He is gone these twelve years and ten, however, and Lir knows where his bones may lie. Pity."

"I did not knew this," I said. "My memory is so screwed up. Please bear with me. I shall miss Benedict, an' he be dead. He was my Master of Arms and taught me of all weapons. But he was gentle."

"As are you, Corwin," she told me, taking my band and drawing me toward her.

"No, not really," I replied, as I seated myself on the couch at her side. Then she said, "We've much time till we dine." Then she leaned against me with the front of her shoulder which was soft.

"When do we eat?" I asked.

"Whenever I declare It," she said, and she faced me more fully.

So I drew her upon me and found the catch to the buckle which covered the softness of her belly. There was more softness beneath, and her hair was green.

Upon the couch, I gave her the ballad. Her lips replied without words.

After we had eaten-and I had learned the trick of eating under water, which I might detail later on if circumstances really warrant-we rose from our places within the marble high hall, decorated with nets and ropes of red and brown, and we made our way back along a narrow corridor, and down, down, beneath the floor of the sea itself, first by means of a spiral staircase that screwed its way through absolute darkness and glowed. After about twenty paces, my brother said, "Screw!" and stepped off the staircase and began swimming downward alongside it.

"It is faster that way," said Moire.

"And it is a long way down," said Deirdre, knowing the distance of the one in Amber.

So we all stepped off and swam downward through darkness, beside the glowing, twisting thing.

It took perhaps ten minutes to reach the bottom, but when our feet touched the floor, we stood, with no tendency to drift. There was light about us then, from a few feeble flames set within niches in the wall.

"Why is this part of the ocean, within the double of Amber, so different from waters elsewhere?" I asked.

"Because that is the way it is," said Deirdre, which irritated me.

We were in an enormous cavern, and tunnels shot off from it in all directions. We moved toward one.

After walking along it for an awfully long while, we began to encounter side passages, some of which had doors or grilles before them and some of which did not.

At the seventh of these we stopped. It was a huge gray door of some slate-like substance, bound in metal, towering to twice my height. I remembered something about the size of Tritons as I regarded that doorway. Then Moire smiled, just at me, and produced a large key from a ring upon her belt and set it within the lock.

She couldn't turn it, though. Perhaps the thing had been unused for too long.

Random growled and his hand shot forward, knocking hers aside.

He seized the key in his right hand and twisted.

There came a click.

Then he pushed the door open with his foot and we stared within.

In a room the size of a ballroom the Pattern was laid. The floor was black and looked smooth as glass. And on the floor was the Pattern.

It shimmered like the cold fire that it was, quivered, made the whole room seem somehow unsubstantial. It was an elaborate tracery

of bright power, composed mainly of curves, though there were a few straight lines near its middle. It reminded me of a fantastically intricate, life-scale version of one of those maze things you do with a pencil (or ballpoint, as the case may be), to get you into or out of something. Like, I could almost see the words "Start Here," somewhere way to the back. It was perhaps a hundred yards across at its narrow middle, and maybe a hundred and fifty long.

It made bells ring within my head,. and then came the throbbing. My mind recoiled from the touch of it. But if I were a prince of Amber, then somewhere within my blood, my nervous system, my genes, this pattern was recorded somehow, so that I would respond properly, so that I could walk the bloody thing.

"Sure wish I could have a cigarette," I said, and the girls giggled, though rather a little too rapidly and perhaps with a bit of a twist of the treble control.

Random took my arm and said, "It's an ordeal, but it's not impossible or we wouldn't be here. Take it very slowly and don't let yourself he distracted. Don't be alarmed by the shower of sparks that will arise with each step. They can't hurt you. You'll feel a mild current passing through you the whole time, and after a while you'll start feeling high. But keep concentrating, and don't forget-keep walking! Don't stop, whatever you do, and don't stray from the path, or it'll probably kill you," and as he spoke, we walked. We walked close to the right-hand wall and rounded the Pattern, heading toward its far end. The girls trailed behind us.

I whispered to him.

"I tried to talk her out of this thing she's planned for you. No luck."

"I figured you would," he said. "Don't worry about it. I can do a year standing on my head, and they might even let me go sooner, if I'm obnoxious enough."

"The girl she has lined up for you is named Vialle. She's blind."

"Great," he said. "Great joke."

"Remember that regency we spoke of?"

"Yeah."

"Be kind to her then, stay the full year, and I will be generous."

Nothing.

Then he squeezed my arm.

"Friend of yours, huh?" he chuckled. "What's she like?"

"Is it a deal?" I said, slowly.

"It's a deal."

Then we stood at the place where the Pattern began, near to the corner of the room.

I moved forward and regarded the line of inlaid fires that started

near to the spot where I had placed my right foot. The Pattern constituted the only illumination within the room. The waters were chill about me.

I strode forward, setting my left foot upon the path. It was outlined by blue-white sparks. Then I set my right foot upon it, and I felt the current Random had mentioned. I took another step.

There was a crackle and I felt my hair beginning to rise. I took another step.

Then the thing began to curve, abruptly, back upon itself. I took ten more paces, and a certain resistance seemed to arise. It was as if a black barrier had grown up before me, of some substance which pushed back upon me with each effort that I made to pass forward.

I fought it. It was the First Veil, I suddenly knew.

To get beyond it would be an achievement, a good sign, showing that I was indeed part of the Pattern. Each raising and lowering of my foot suddenly required a terrible effort, and sparks shot forth from my hair.

I concentrated on the fiery line. I walked it breathing heavily.

Suddenly the pressure was eased. The Veil had parted before me, as abruptly as it had occurred. I had passed beyond it and acquired something,

I had gained a piece of myself.

I saw the paper skins and the knobby, stick-like bones of the dead of Auschwitz. I had been present at Nuremberg, I knew. I heard the voice of Stephen Spender reciting "Vienna," and I saw Mother Courage cross the stage on the night of a Brecht premiere. I saw the rockets leap up from the stained hard places, Peenemunde, Vandenberg, Kennedy,

Kyzyl Kum in Kazakhstan, and I touched with my hands the Wall of China. We were drinking beer and wine, and Shaxpur said he was drunk and went off to puke. I entered the green forests of the Western Reserve and took three scalps one day. I hummed a tune as we marched along and it caught on. It become "Auprés de ma Blonde." I remembered, I remembered . . . my life within the Shadow place its inhabitants had called the Earth. Three more steps, and I held a bloody blade and saw three dead men and my horse, on which I had fled the revolution in France. And more, so much more, back to—

I took another step.

Back to—

The dead. They were all about me. There was a horrible stink-the smell of decaying flesh-and I heard the howls of a dog who was being beaten to death. Billows of black smoke filled the sky, and an icy wind swept around me bearing a few small drops of rain. My throat was parched and my hands shook and my head was on fire. I staggered

alone, seeing everything through the haze of the fever that burned me. The gutters were filled with garbage and dead cats and the emptyings of chamber pots. With a rattle and the ringing of a bell, the death wagon thundered by, splashing me with mud and cold water.

How long I wandered, I do not know, before a woman seized my arm and I saw a Death's Head ring upon her finger. She led me to her rooms, but discovered there that I had no money and was incoherent. A look of fear crossed her pained face, erasing the smile on her bright lips, and she fled and I collapsed upon her bed.

Later-again, how much later I do not know-a big man, the girl's Black Davy, came and slapped me across the face and dragged me to my feet. I seized his right biceps and hung on. He half carried, half pulled me toward the door.

When I realized that he was going to cast me out into the cold, I tightened my grip to protest it. I squeezed with all my remaining strength, mumbling half-coherent pleas.

Then through sweat and tear-filled eyes. I saw his face break open and heard a scream come forth from between his stained teeth.

The bone in his arm had broken where I'd squeezed it.

He pushed me away with his left hand and fell to his knees, weeping. I sat upon the floor, and my head cleared for a moment.

"I . . . am . . . staying here," I said, "until I feel better. Get out. If you come back-I'll kill you."

"You've got the plague!" he cried. "They'll come for your bones tomorrow!" and he spat then, got to his feet, and staggered out.

I made it to the door and barred it. Then I crawled back to the bed and slept.

If they came for my bones the next day, they were disappointed. For, perhaps ten hours later, in the middle of the night, I awoke in a cold sweat and realized my fever had broken. I was weak, but rational once more.

I realized I had lived through the plague.

I took a man's cloak I found in the wardrobe and took some money I found in a drawer.

Then I went forth into London and the night, in a year of the plague, looking for something. . . .

I had no recollection of who I was or what I was doing there.

That was how it had started.

I was well into the Pattern now, and the sparks flashed continually about my feet, reaching to the height of my knees. I no longer knew which direction I faced, or where Random and Deirdre and Moire stood. The currents swept through me and it seemed my eyeballs were vibrating. Then came a pins-and-needle feeling in my cheeks and a coldness on the back of my neck, I clenched my teeth to

keep them from chattering.

The auto accident had not given me my amnesia. I had been without full memory since the reign of Elizabeth I. Flora must have concluded that the recent accident had restored me. She had known of my condition. I was suddenly struck by the thought that she was on that Shadow Earth mainly to keep tabs on me.

Since the sixteenth century. then?

That I couldn't say. I'd find out, though.

I took six more rapid steps, reaching the end of an arc and coming to the beginning place of a straight line.

I set my foot upon it, and with each step that I took, another barrier began to rise against me. It was the Second Veil.

There was a right-angle turn, then another, then another.

I was a prince of Amber. It was true. There had been fifteen brothers and six were dead. There had been eight Sisters, and two were dead, possibly four. We had spent much of our time in wandering in Shadow, or in our own universes. It is an academic, though valid philosophical question, as to whether one with power over Shadow could create his own universe. Whatever the ultimate answer, from a practical point we could.

Another curve began, and it was as though I were walking in glue as I moved slowly along it.

One, two, three, four. . . I raised my fiery boots and let them down again.

My head throbbed and my heart felt as though it were fibrillating to pieces.

Amber!

The going was suddenly easy once more, as I remembered Amber.

Amber was the greatest city which had ever existed or ever would exist. Amber had always been and always would be, and every other city, everywhere every other city that existed was but a reflection of a shadow of some phase of Amber. Amber, Amber, Amber . . . I remember thee. I shall never forget thee again. I guess, deep inside me, I never really did, through all those centuries I wandered the Shadow Earth, for often at night my dreams were troubled by images of thy green and golden spires and thy sweeping terraces. I remember thy wide promenades and the decks of flowers, golden and red. I recall the sweetness of thy airs, and the temples, palaces, and pleasances thou containest, contained, will always contain, Amber, immortal city from which every other city has taken its shape, I cannot forget thee, even now, nor forget that day on the Pattern of

Rebma when I remembered thee within thy reflected walls, fresh from a meal after starvation and the loving of Moire, but nothing could compare with the pleasure and the love of remembering thee;

and even now, as I stand contemplating the Courts of Chaos, telling this story to the only one present to hear, that perhaps he may repeat it, that it will not die after I have died within; even now, I remember thee with love, city that I was born to rule. . . .

Ten paces, then a swirling filigree of fire confronted me, I essayed it, my sweat vanishing into the waters as fast as it sprang forth.

It was tricky, so devilish tricky, and it seemed that the waters of the room suddenly moved in great currents which threatened to sweep me from the Pattern. I struggled on, resisting them. Instinctively, I knew that to leave the Pattern before I'd completed it would mean my death. I dared not raise my eyes from the places of light that lay before me, to see how far I had come, how far I had yet to go.

The currents subsided and more of my memories returned, memories of my life as a prince of Amber. . . . No, they are not yours for the asking: they are mine, some vicious and cruel, others perhaps noble-memories going back to my childhood in the great palace of Amber, with the green banner of my father Oberon flaring above it, white unicorn rampant, facing to the dexter.

Random bad made it through the Pattern. Even Deirdre had made it. Therefore, I, Corwin, would make it, no matter what the resistance.

I emerged from the filigree and marched along the Grand Curve. The forces that shape the universe fell upon me and beat me into their image.

I had an advantage over any other person who attempted the walk, however. I knew that I had done it before, so I knew that I could do it. This helped me against the unnatural fears which rose like black clouds and were gone again, only to return, their strength redoubled. I walked the Pattern and I remembered all, I remembered all the days before my centuries on the Shadow Earth and I remembered other places of Shadow, many of them special and dear to me, and one which I loved above all, save for Amber.

I walked three more curves, a straight line, and a series of sharp arcs, and I held within me once again a consciousness of the things which I had never really lost: mine was the power over Shadows.

Ten arcs which left me dizzy, another short arc, a straight line, and the Final Veil.

It was agony to move. Everything tried to beat me aside. The waters were cold, then boiling. It seemed that they constantly pushed against me. I struggled, putting one foot before the other. The sparks reached as high as my waist at this point, then my breast, my shoulders. They were into my eyes. They were all about me. I could barely see the Pattern itself.

Then a short arc, ending in blackness.

One, two. . . And to take the last step was like trying to push

through a concrete wail.

I did it.

Then I turned slowly and looked back over the course I had come. I would not permit myself the luxury of sagging to my knees. I was a prince of Amber, and by God! nothing could humble me in the presence of my peers. Not even the Pattern!

I waved jauntily in what I thought to be the right direction. Whether or not I could be made out very clearly was another matter.

Then I stood there a moment and thought.

I knew the power of the Pattern now. Going back along it would be no trick at all.

But why bother?

I lacked my deck of cards, but the power of the Pattern could serve me just as well. . . .

They were waiting for me, my brother and sister and Moire with her thighs like marble pillars.

Deirdre could take care of herself from here on out-after all, we'd saved her life. I didn't feel obligated to go on protecting her on a day-by-day basis. Random was stuck in Rebma for a year, unless he had guts enough to leap forward and take the Pattern to this still center of power and perhaps escape. And as for Moire, it had been nice knowing her, and maybe I'd see her again some day, and like that. I closed my eyes and bowed my head.

Before I did so, though, I saw a fleeting shadow.

Random? Trying it? Whatever, he wouldn't know where I was headed. No one would.

I opened my eyes and I stood in the middle of the same Pattern, in reverse.

I was cold, and I was damn tired, but I was in Amber-in the real room, of which the one I had departed was but an image. From the Pattern, I could transfer myself to any point I wished within Amber.

Getting back would be a problem, however.

So I stood there and dripped and considered.

If Eric had taken the royal suite, then I might find him there. Or perhaps in the throne room. But then, I'd have to make my own way back to the place of power, I'd have to walk the Pattern again, in order to reach the escape point.

I transferred myself to a hiding place I knew of within the palace. It was a windowless cubicle into which some light trickled from observation slits high overhead. I bolted its one sliding panel from the inside, dusted off a wooden bench set beside the wall, spread my cloak upon it and stretched out for a nap. If anyone came groping his way down from above, I'd hear him long before he reached me.

I slept.

After a while, I awakened. So I arose, dusted off my cloak and donned it once more. Then I began to negotiate the series of pegs which laddered their way up into the palace.

I knew where it was, the third floor, by the markings on the walls.

I swung myself over to a small landing and searched for the peephole. I found it and gazed through. Nothing. The library was empty. So I slid back the panel and entered.

Within, I was stricken by the multitudes of books. They always do that to me. I considered everything, including the display cases, and finally moved toward the place where a crystal case contained everything that led up to a family banquet-private joke. It held four decks of the family cards, and I sought about for a means of obtaining one without setting off an alarm which might keep me from using it.

After maybe ten minutes, I succeeded in gimmicking the proper case. It was tricky. Then, pack in hands, I found a comfortable seat for the consideration thereof.

The cards were just like Flora's and they held us all under glass and were cold to the touch. Now, too, I knew why.

So I shuffled and spread them all out before me In the proper manner. Then I read them, and I saw that bad things were in store for the entire family; and I gathered them all together then.

Save for one.

It was the card depicting my brother Bleys. I replaced the others in their case and tucked it into my belt. Then I considered Bleys.

At about that time there came a scratching In the lock of the great door to the library. What could I do? I loosened my blade in its scabbard and waited. I ducked low behind the desk, though.

Peering out, I saw that it was a guy named Dik, who had obviously come to clean the place, as he set out emptying the ashtrays and wastebaskets and dusting the shelves.

Since it would be demeaning to be discovered, I exposed myself.

I rose and said, "Hello, Dik. Remember me?"

He turned three kinds of pale, half bolted, and said:

"Of course, Lord. How could I forget?"

"I suppose it would be possible, after all this time."

"Never, Lord Corwin," he replied.

"I suppose I'm here without official sanction, and engaged in a bit of illicit research," I said "but if Eric doesn't like it when you tell him that you saw me, please explain that I was simply exercising my rights, and he will be seeing me personally-soon."

"I'll do that, m'lord," he said, bowing.

"Come sit with me a moment, friend Dik, and I'll tell you more."

And he did, so I did.

"There was a time," I said, addressing this ancient visage, "when I was considered gone for good and abandoned forever. Since I still live, however, and since I maintain all my faculties, I fear that I must dispute Eric's claim to the throne of Amber. Though it's not a thing to be settled simply, as he is not the first-born, nor do I feel he would enjoy popular support if another were in sight. For these, among other reasons-most of them personal-I am about to oppose him. I have not yet decided how, nor upon what grounds, but by God! he deserves opposition! Tell him that. If he wishes to seek me, tell him that I dwell among Shadows, but different ones than before. He may know what I mean by that. I will not be easily destroyed, for I will guard myself at least as well as he does here. I will oppose him from hell to eternity, and I will not cease until one of us is dead. What say you to this, old retainer?"

And he took my hand and kissed it.

"Hail to thee, Corwin, Lord of Amber," he said, and there was a tear in his eye.

Then the door cracked a crack behind him and swung open.

Eric entered.

"Hello," said I, Rising and putting a most obnoxious twang to my voice. "I didn't expect to meet with you this early in the game. How go things in Amber?"

And his eyes were wide with amaze and his voice heavy with that which men call sarcasm, and I can't think of a better word, as he replied:

"Well, when it comes to things, Corwin. Poorly, on other counts, however."

"Pity," said I, "and how shall we put things aright?"

"I know a way," he said, and then he glared at Dik, who promptly departed and closed the door behind him. I heard it snick shut.

Eric loosened his blade in its scabbard.

"You want the throne," he said.

"Don't we all?" I told him.

"I guess so," he said, with a sigh. "It's true, that uneasy-lies-the-head bit. I don't know why we are driven to strive so for this ridiculous position. But you must recall that I've defeated you twice, mercifully granting you your life on a Shadow world the last occasion."

"It wasn't that merciful," I said. "You know where you left me, to die of the plague. The first time, as I remember, it was pretty much a draw."

"Then it is between the two of us now, Corwin," he said. "I am your elder and your better. If you wish to try me at arms, I find myself suitably attired. Slay me, and the throne will probably be yours. Try

it. I don't think you can succeed, however. And I'd like to quit your claim right now. So come at me. Let's see what you learned on the Shadow Earth."

And his blade was in his hand and mine in mine.

I moved around the desk.

"What an enormous chutzpah you possess," I told him. "What makes you better than the rest of us, and more fit to rule?"

"The fact that I was able to occupy the throne," he replied. "Try and take it."

And I did.

I tried a headcut, which he parried; and I parried his riposte to my heart and cut at his wrist.

He parried this and kicked a small stool between us. I set it aside, hopefully in the direction of his face, with my right toe, but it missed and he had at me again.

I parried his attack, and he mine. Then I lunged, was parried, was attacked, and parried again myself.

I tried a very fancy attack I'd learned in France, which involved a beat, a feint in quarte, a feint in sixte, and a lunge veering off into an attack on his wrist.

I nicked him and the blood flowed.

"Oh, damnable brother!" he said, retreating. "Report has it Random accompanies thee."

"This is true," said I. "More than one of us are assembled against you."

And he lunged then and beat me back, and I felt suddenly that for all my work he was still my master. He was perhaps one of the greatest swordsmen I had ever faced. I suddenly had the feeling that I couldn't take him, and I parried like mad and retreated in the same fashion as he beat me back, step by step. We'd both had centuries under the greatest masters of the blade in business. The greatest alive, I knew, was brother Benedict, and he wasn't around to help, one way or the other. So I snatched things off the desk with my left hand and threw them at Eric. But he dodged everything and came on strong, and I circled to his left and all like that, but I couldn't draw the point of his blade from my left eye. And I was afraid. The man was magnificent. If I didn't hate him so, I would have applauded his performance.

I kept backing away, and the fear and the knowledge came upon me: I knew I still couldn't take him. He was a better man than I was, when it came to the blade. I cursed this, but I couldn't get around it. I tried three more elaborate attacks and was defeated on each occasion. He parried me and made me retreat before his own attacks.

Now don't get the wrong idea. I'm damn good. It's just that he

seemed better.

Then there were some alarms and excursions in the hall outside. Eric's retainers were coming, and if he didn't kill me before they arrived, then I was confident that they'd do the job-probably with a bolt from a crossbow.

There was blood dripping from his right wrist. His hand was still steady but I had the feeling then that under other circumstances, by fighting a defensive fight, I just might be able to wear him down with that wrist injury going against him, and perhaps I could get through his guard at the proper moment when he began to slow.

I cursed softly and he laughed.

"You're a fool to have come here," he said.

He didn't realize what I was doing until it was too late. (I'd been retreating until the door was at my back. It was risky, leaving myself with no room for retreat, but it was better than sure death.)

With my left hand, I managed to drop the bar. It was a big, heavy door and they'd have to knock it down now to get in. That gave me a few more minutes. It also gave me a shoulder wound, from an attack I could only partly parry as I dropped the bar. But it was my left shoulder. My sword arm remained intact.

I smiled, to put up a good front.

"Perhaps you were a fool, to enter here," I said. "You're slowing. you know," and I tried a hard, fast, vicious attack,

He parried it, but he fell back two paces in doing so.

"That wound's getting to you," I added. "Your arm's weakening. You can feel the strength leaving it-"

"Shut up!" he said, and I realized I'd gotten through to him. This increased my chances by several percent, I decided, and I pressed him as hard as I could, realizing I couldn't keep that pace up very long.

But Eric didn't realize it.

I'd planted the seeds of fear, and he fell back before my sudden onslaught.

There was a banging on the door but I didn't have to worry about that for a while anyway.

"I'm going to take you, Eric," I said. "I'm tougher than I used to be, and you've had it, brother."

I saw the fear begin in his eyes, and it spread over his face, and his style shifted to follow suit. He began fighting a completely defensive battle, backing away from my attack. I'm sure he wasn't faking either. I felt I had bluffed him, for he had always been better than I. But what if it had been partly psychological on my part too? What if I had almost beaten myself with this attitude, which Eric had helped to foster? What if I had bluffed myself all along? Maybe I was as good. With a strange sense of confidence, I tried the same attack I

had used before and I scored, leaving another trail of red on his forearm.

"That was rather stupid. Eric." I said, "to fall for the same trick twice," and he backed around a wide chair. We fought across it for a time.

The banging on the door stopped, and the voices which had been shouting inquiries through it fell silent.

"They've gone for axes," Eric panted. "They'll be in here in no time."

I wouldn't drop my smile. I held it and said: "It'll take a few minutes-which is more time than I'll need to finish this. You can hardly keep your guard now, and the blood keeps running-look at it!"

"Shut up!"

"By the time they get through, there will he only one prince in Amber, and it won't be you!"

Then, with his left arm, he swept a row of books from a shelf and they struck me and fell about me.

He didn't seize the opportunity to attack,. however. He dashed across the room, picking up a small chair, which he held in his left hand.

He wedged himself into a corner and held the chair and his blade before him.

There were rapid footsteps in the hall outside, and then axes began to ring upon the door.

"Come on!" he said. "Try and take me now!"

"You're scared," I said.

He laughed.

"Academic," he replied. "You can't take me before that door falls, and then it will be all over for you."

I had to agree. He could hold off my blade with that setup, at least for quite a few minutes.

I crossed the room quickly, to the opposite wall.

With my left hand, I opened the panel through which I had entered.

"Okay," I said. "it looks like you're going to live-for a time. You're lucky. Next time we meet, there won't be anyone to help you."

He spat and called me a few traditional vile names, even putting down the chair to add an obscene gesture, as I ducked through the panel and closed it behind me.

There came a thunk, and eight inches of steel gleamed on my side of the panel as I was fastening it. He had thrown his blade. Risky, if I chose to return. But he knew I wouldn't, for the door sounded about ready to fall.

I descended the pegs as rapidly as I could, to the place where I

had slept earlier. As I did, I considered my increased skill with the blade. At first, in the battle, I bad been awed by the man who had beaten me before. Now, though, I wondered. Perhaps those centuries on the Shadow Earth were not a waste. Maybe I had actually gotten better during that time. Now I felt that I might be Eric's equal with the weapon. This made me feel good. If we met again, as I was sure we would, and there was no outside interference-who knew? I would court the chance, however. Today's encounter had scared him. I was certain. That might serve to slow his hand, to cause the necessary hesitation on the next occasion.

I let go and dropped the final fifteen feet, bending my knees as I landed. I was the proverbial five minutes ahead of the posse, but I was sure I could take advantage of it and escape. For I had the cards in my belt.

I drew the card that was Bleys and stared at it. My shoulder hurt, but I forgot it, as the coldness came upon me.

There were two ways to depart directly from Amber into Shadow. . .

One was the Pattern, seldom used for this purpose.

Another was the Trumps, if you could trust a brother.

I considered Bleys. I could almost trust him. He was my brother, but he was in trouble and could use my help.

I stared at him, flame-crowned, dressed all in red and orange, with a sword in his right hand and a glass of wine in his left. The devil danced in his blue eyes, his beard blazed, and the tracery on his blade, I suddenly realized, flared with a portion of the Pattern. His rings flashed. He seemed to move.

The contact came like an icy wind.

The figure on the card seemed life-sized now and changed position into whatever stance he presently held. His eyes did not quite focus upon me, and his lips moved.

"Who is it?" they said, and I heard the words.

"Corwin," said I, and he held forth his left hand, which no longer bore the goblet.

"Then come to me, if you would."

I reached forth and our fingers met. I took a step.

I was still holding the card in my left hand, but Bleys and I stood together on a cliff and there was a chasm to our side and a high fortress to our other side. The sky above us was the color of flame.

"Hello, Bleys," I said, tucking the card into my belt with the others. "Thanks for the assistance."

I suddenly felt weak and realized the blood was still flowing from my left shoulder.

"You're wounded!" he said, throwing an arm about my shoulders,

and I started to nod but fainted instead.

Later that night, I sprawled in a big chair within the fortress and drank whiskey. We smoked and passed the bottle and talked.

"So you were actually in Amber?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And you wounded Eric in your duel?"

"Yes."

"Damn! I wish you'd killed him!" Then he reflected. "Well, maybe not. Then you'd have held the throne. I might have a better chance against Eric than I'd have had against you. I don't know. What are your plans?"

I decided upon complete honesty.

"We all want the throne," I said. "so there's no reason to lie to one another. I'm not about to try killing you for it-that would be foolish-but on the other hand. I'm not about to renounce my claim because I'm enjoying your hospitality. Random would like it, but he's pretty much out of the picture.

No one has beard from Benedict for some time now. Gerard and Caine seem to he supporting Eric, rather than promoting their own claims. The same goes for Julian. That leaves Brand and our sisters. I don't know what the hell Brand is up to these days, but I do know that Deirdre is without power, unless she and Llewella can raise something in Rebma, and Flora is Eric's creature. I don't know what Fiona is up to."

"And so that leaves us," said Bleys, pouring us each another drink. "Yes, you're right. I don't know what's going on in everone's head right now, but I can assess our relative strengths and I think I'm in the best position. You made a wise choice in coming to me. Support me, and I'll give you a regency."

"Bless your heart," I said. We'll see."

We sipped our whiskies.

"What else is there to do?" he asked, and I realized that the question was important.

"I might raise an army of my own, to lay siege to Amber," I told him.

"Where among Shadows lies your army?" he inquired.

"That, of course, is my affair." I said. "I don't think I'd oppose you. When it comes to monarchs. I'd like to see either you. me, Gerard, or Benedict-if he still lives-upon the throne."

"Preferably you, of course."

"Of course."

"Then we understand one another. So I think we can work together, for the time being."

"And I," I agreed, "else I would not have delivered myself into

your hands."

He smiled within his heard.

"You needed someone," he said, "and I was the lesser evil."

"True," I agreed,

"I wish Benedict were here. I wish Gerard bad not sold out."

"Wishes, wishes," I told him, "Wish in one hand and do something else in the other, and squeeze them both and see which comes true."

"Well taken," he said.

We smoked a while in silence.

"How far can I trust you?" he asked.

"As far as I can trust you."

"Then let's make a deal. Frankly, I had thought you dead for many years. I hadn't foreseen your showing up at a crucial time and pressing your own claim. But you're here, and that's that. Let's form an alliance, combine our forces and lay siege to Amber. Whichever of us lives through it winds up on top. If we both do, well-hell!-we can always fight a duel!"

I thought about it. It sounded like the best deal I'd get anywhere.

So I said, "I'd like to sleep on it. Tell you in the morning. okay?"

"Okay."

We finished our drinks then and fell to reminiscing. My shoulder throbbed a bit, but the whisky helped, and the salve which Bleys had supplied. After a time, we were almost maudlin.

It is strange, I guess, to have kin and to be without kinship. for as long as our lives had led us along our separate paths. Lord! We talked the moon out of the heavens before either of us grew tired. Then he clapped me upon my good shoulder and told me that he was beginning to feel his load and that a servant would be by in the morning to bring my breakfast. I nodded, we embraced. and he retired.

Then I moved to the window, and from that vantage I could see down far into the chasm.

The campfires below burned like stars. There were thousands of them. I could tell that Bleys had assembled a mighty force, and I was envious. But, on the other hand, it was a good thing. If anyone could take Eric, it was probably Bleys. He wouldn't he a bad thing in Amber; it was just that I preferred me.

Then I watched a while longer, and I saw that strange shapes moved among the lights. I wondered then as to the nature of his army.

Whatever, it was more than I possessed.

I made my way back to the table and poured me a final drink. Before I quaffed it, however, I lighted a taper. In its light, I withdrew the pack of cards I had stolen.

I spread them before me and I came across the one depicting Eric.

I laid it in the center of the table and put the rest away.

After a time, it came to life; and I saw Eric in his sleeping garments and I heard the words, "Who is it?" His arm was bound.

"Me," I said, "Corwin. How are you?"

He cursed then, and I laughed. This was a dangerous game and maybe the whisky had contributed to It. but I continued: "I just felt like telling you that all goes well with me. I also wanted to advise you that you were right when you spoke of the uneasy head. You won't be wearing it long, though.

So cheerio! Brother! The day I come again to Amber is the day you die! Just thought I'd tell you, since that day is not too far off."

"Come ahead," he told me, "and I'll not want for grace in the matter of your passing."

His eyes focused on me then and we were close.

I thumbed my nose at him and passed my palm over the card.

It was like hanging up a telephone, and I shuffled Eric in with all the rest.

I wondered though, as I approached sleep. concerning those troops of Bleys which occupied the defile below, and I thought upon Eric's defenses.

It would not be easy.

Chapter 6

The land was known as Avernus, and the assembled troops were not quite men. I reviewed them the following morning, walking behind Bleys. They were all of them around seven feet in height, had very red skins and little hair, catlike eyes, and six-digited hands and feet. They wore garments that looked as light as silk, but were woven of something else and were mainly gray or blue in color. Each bore two short blades, hooked at the end. Their ears were pointed and their many fingers clawed.

The climate was warm and the colors bewildering, and everyone thought we were gods.

Bleys had found a place where the religion involved brother-gods who looked like us and had their troubles. Invariably, in the terms of this mythos, an evil brother would seize power and seek to oppress the good brothers. And of course there was the legend of an Apocalypse where they themselves would be called upon to stand on the side of the surviving good brothers.

I wore my left arm in a black sling and considered those who were about to die.

I stood before a trooper and looked up at him. I asked him, "Do you know who Eric is?"

"The Lord of Evil," he replied.

I nodded and said, "Very good," and passed on.

Bleys had custom-made cannon fodder.

"How large is your army?" I asked him.

"Around fifty thousand," he replied.

"I salute those who are about to Give Their All," I told him. "You can't take Amber with fifty thousand men, even providing you can get them all to the foot of Kolvir intact-and you can't It's silly even to consider using these poor bastards against the immortal city, with their toy swords and all."

"I know," he said, "but they're not all I've got."

"You'll need a lot more."

"Then how do three navies sound, half again the size of Caine's and Gerard's fleets put together?

"I've a way."

"Not yet enough," said I, "and barely a beginning."

"I know. I'm still building," he said.

"Well, we'd better build a lot more. Eric will sit in Amber and kill us as we march through Shadows. When the remaining forces finally reach the foot of Kolvir, he'll decimate them there. Then there will be the climb to Amber. How many hundred do you think will remain

when we reach the city? Enough to be dispatched in five minutes, at almost no cost to Eric. If this is the best you've got, brother Bleys, I have misgivings concerning this expedition."

"Eric has announced his coronation in three months' time," he said. "I can triple my forces by then-at least. Perhaps I can even have a quarter of a million Shadow troops to lead against Amber. There are other worlds like this one, and I will penetrate them. I will raise me such a force of holy crusaders as has never been sent against Amber before."

"And Eric will have had the same time to intensify his defenses. I don't know, Bleys . . . it's almost a suicide run. I didn't know the full situation when I came here-"

"And what have you brought with you?" be asked. "Nothing! It is rumored that you once commanded troops. Where are they?"

I turned away from him.

"They are no more," I said. "I am certain."

"Gould you not find a Shadow of your Shadow?"

"I don't want to try," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Then what real good are you to me?"

"I'll go," I told him, "if that's all you had in mind, if that's all you really wanted me around for-more bodies."

"Wait!" he cried out. "I spoke hastily. I don't want to lose your counsel, if nothing else. Stay with me, please. I will even apologize."

"That is not necessary," I said, knowing what this thing means to a prince of Amber. "I'll stay. I think I can help you."

"Good!" and he clapped me upon my good shoulder.

"And I'll get you more troops," I added. "Never fear."

And I did.

I walked among Shadows, and found a race of furry creatures, dark and clawed and fanged, reasonably manlike, and about as intelligent as a freshman in the high school of your choice-sorry, kids, but what I mean is they were loyal, devoted, honest, and too easily screwed by bastards like me and my brother. I felt like the dee-jay of your choice.

Around a hundred thousand worshiped us to the extent of taking up arms.

Bleys was impressed and shut up. After a week my shoulder was healed. After two months we had our quarter million and more.

"Corwin, Corwin! You're still Corwin!" he said, and we took another drink.

But I was feeling kind of funny. Most of these troops were destined to die. I was the agent responsible for much of this. I felt some remorse, though I knew the difference between Shadow and Substance. Each death would be a real death; however, I knew that

also.

And some nights I dwelled upon the playing cards. The missing Trumps had been restored to the pack I held. One of them was a portrait of Amber itself, and I knew it could bear me back into the city. The others were those of our dead or missing relatives. And one was Dad's, and I skipped it over quickly. He was gone.

I stared at each face for a long while to consider what might be gained from each. I cast the cards several times, and the same thing came up on each occasion.

His name was Caine.

He wore satin that was green and black, and a dark three-cornered hat with a green plume of feathers trailing down behind. At his belt there was an emerald-studded dagger. He was dark.

"Caine," I said.

After a time, there came a reply.

"Who?" he asked.

"Corwin," said I.

"Corwin! Is this a joke?"

"No."

"What do you want?"

"What've you got?"

"You know that." and his eyes shifted and lay upon me, but I watched his hand, which was near to his dagger.

"Where are you?"

"With Bleys."

"There was a rumor you'd shown up in Amber recently-and I wondered at the bandages on Eric's arm."

"You're looking at the reason," I said. "What's your price?"

"What do you mean?"

"Let us be frank and to the point. Do you think Bleys and I can take Eric?"

"No, that's why I'm with Eric. And I won't sell out my armada either, if that's what you're after-and I'd imagine you are."

I smiled.

"Perceptive brother," I replied. "Well, it's been nice talking to you. See you in Amber-maybe."

I moved my hand, and he cried out.

"Wait!"

"Why?"

"I don't even know your offer."

"Yes. you do," I said. "You've guessed it, and you're not interested."

"I didn't say that. It's just that I know where the equities lie."

"You mean the power."

"Okay, the power. What've you got to offer?"

We talked for maybe an hour, after which time the northern seaways were open to the three phantom fleets of Bleys, which might enter expecting reinforcements.

"If you fail, there'll be three beheadings in Amber," said he.

"But you don't really expect that, do you?" I asked.

"No. I think either you or Bleys will sit upon the throne before too very long. I'll be satisfied to serve the winner.

That regency would be nice. I'd still like Random's head as part of the price, though."

"No deal," I said. "Take it as you've heard it or forget it."

"I'll take it."

I smiled and placed my palm upon the card and he was gone.

Gerard was a matter I'd leave for the morrow. Caine had exhausted me.

I rolled into bed and slept.

Gerard, when be learned the score, agreed to lay off us. Mainly because it was I who was asking, as he had considered Eric a lesser of potent evils.

I concluded the deal quickly, promising him everything he asked, as no heads were involved.

Then I reviewed the troops again and told them more of Amber. Strangely, they got along like brothers, the big red guys and the little hairy ones.

It was sad and it was true.

We were their gods, and that was that.

I saw the fleet, sailing on a great ocean the color of blood. I wondered. In the Shadow worlds through which they sailed, many of them would be lost.

I considered the troops of Avemus, and my recruits from the place called Ri'ik. Theirs was the task of marching to Earth and Amber.

I shuffled my cards and cast them. I picked up the one called Benedict. For a long while I searched it, but there was nothing but the cold.

Then I seized upon Brand's. For another long while there was nothing but the cold.

Then there came a scream. It was a horrible, tormented thing.

"Help me!" came the cry.

"How can I?" I asked.

"Who is that?" be asked, and I saw his body writhe.

"Corwin."

"Deliver me from this place, brother Corwin! Anything you name shall be yours in return!"

"Where are you?"

"I-"

And there came a swirling of things my mind refused to conceive of, and another scream, torn forth as though in agony and ending in silence.

Then the coldness came in again.

I found that I was shaking. From what, I did not know.

I lit a cigarette and moved to the window to consider the night, leaving the cards where they had fallen upon the table-top of my room within the garrison.

The stars were tiny and misted over. There were no constellations that I could recognize. A small blue moon dropped quickly through the darkness. The night had come on with a sudden, icy chill and I wrapped my cloak close about me. I thought back to the winter of our disastrous campaign in Russia. Gods! I'd almost frozen to death! And where did it all lead?

To the throne of Amber, of course.

For that was sufficient justification for anything.

But what of Brand? Where was he? What was happening about him, and who had done this thing to him?

Answers? None.

I wondered, though, as I stared up and out, tracing the path of that blue disk in its descent. Was there something I was missing In the whole picture, some factor I didn't quite dig?

No answer.

I seated myself at the table once more, a small drink at my hand.

I fingered my way through the pack and found Dad's card.

Oberon, Lord of Amber, stood before me in his green and his gold. High, wide, and thick, his beard black and shot with silver, his hair the same. Green rings in gold settings and a blade of golden color. It had once seemed to me that nothing could ever displace the immortal liege of Amber from his throne. What had happened? I still didn't know. But he was gone. How had my father met with his end?

I stared and concentrated.

Nothing, nothing—

Something?

Something.

There came a responding movement, though ever so weak, and the figure on the card turned in upon itself and shriveled to a shadow of the man he had been.

"Father?" I asked.

Nothing.

"Father?"

"Yes . . ." Very faint and distant, as though through a seashell, immersed in its monotone humming.

"Where are you? What has happened?"

"I . ." Long pause.

"Yes? This is Corwin, your son. What came to pass in Amber, that you are gone?"

"My time," he said, sounding even further away.

"Do you mean that you abdicated? None of my brothers has given me the tale, and I do not trust them sufficiently to ask them. Eric now holds the city and Julian guards the Forest of Arden. Caine and Gerard maintain the seas. Bleys would oppose all and I am allied with him. What are your wishes in this matter?"

"You are the only one-who-has asked," he gasped. "Yes. . ."

" 'Yes' what?"

"Yes, oppose-them. . ."

"What of you? How can I help you?"

"I am beyond help. Take the throne. .

"I? Or Bleys and I?"

"You!" he said.

"Yes?"

"You have my blessing, . . . Take the throne-and be quick-about it!"

"Why, Father?"

"I lack the breath-Take it!"

Then he, too, was gone.

So Dad lived. That was interesting, What to do now?

I sipped my drink and thought about it.

He still lived, somewhere, and he was king in Amber. Why had he left? Where had he gone? What kind of, which, and how many? Like that.

Who knew? Not I. So there was no more to say, for now.

However...

I couldn't put the thing down. I want you to know that Dad and I never got along very well. I didn't hate him, like Random or some of the others. But I, sure as hell, had no reason to be especially fond of him. He had been big, he had been powerful, and he had been there. That was about it. He was also most of the history of Amber, as we knew it, and the history of Amber stretches back for so many millennia that you may as well stop counting.

So what do you do?

As for me, I finished my drink and went to bed,

The following morning I attended a meeting of Bley's general staff. He had four admirals, each in charge of roughly a quarter of his fleet, and a whole mess of army officers. Altogether there were about thirty of the high-ranking brass at the meeting, big and red or small and hairy, as the case might be.

The meeting lasted perhaps four hours, and then we all broke for lunch. It was decided that we would move three days hence. Since it would require one of the blood to open the way to Amber, I was to lead the fleet aboard the flagship, and Bleys would take his infantry through lands of Shadow.

I was troubled by this, and I asked him what would have happened had I not shown up to give this assistance. I was told two things in reply: one, if he had had to go it alone, he would have led the fleet through and left them at a great distance from shore, returned in a single vessel to Avernus and led his foot soldiers forward to rendezvous at a given time; and two, he had purposely sought for a Shadow in which a brother would appear to give him aid.

I had some misgivings when I heard about the latter, though I knew I was really me. The former smacked of being a bit unworkable, since the fleet would be too far out to sea to receive any signals from the shore, and the chance of missing the date-allowing for mishaps when it came to a body that large-was too great, as I saw it, to encourage a whole big lot of faith In his general plan.

But as a tactician, I had always thought him brilliant; and when he laid out the maps of Amber and the outlying Country which he himself had drawn, and when he had explained the tactics to be employed therein, I knew that he was a prince of Amber, almost matchless in his guile.

The only thing was, we were up against another prince of Amber, one who occupied what was definitely a stronger position. I was worried, but with the impending Coronation, it seemed about the only course available to us, and I decided to go along for the whole ride. If we lost, we were creamed, but he held the biggest threat available and had a workable time schedule, which I didn't.

So I walked the land called Avernus and considered its foggy valleys and chasms, its smoking craters, its bright, bright sun against its crazy sky, its icy nights and too hot days, its many rocks and carloads of dark sand, its tiny, though vicious and poisonous beasts, and its big purple plants, like spineless cacti; and on the afternoon of the second day, as I stood on a cliff overlooking the sea, beneath a tower of massed vermilion clouds, I decided that I rather liked the place for all that, and if its sons would perish in the wars of the gods, I would immortalize them one day in song if I were able.

This mild balm in mind for what I feared, I joined the fleet and took command. If we made it, they would be feted forever in the halls of the immortals.

I was guide and opener of the way. I rejoiced.

So we set sail the following day. and I directed things from the lead ship. I led us into a storm, and we emerged that much nearer our

destination. I led us past an enormous whirlpool, and we were so much to the good. I led us through a shallow rocky place. and the shade of the waters deepened afterward. Their colors began to approximate those of Amber. So I still knew how to do it. I could influence our fate in time and place. I could take us home. Home for me. that is.

I led us past strange islands where green birds cawed and green apes hung like fruit in the trees, swung, sometimes gibbered, and threw rocks into the sea. Aimed, doubtless, at us.

I took us far out to sea, and then nosed the fleet around back in the direction of shore.

Bleys by now was marching across the plains of the worlds. Somehow, I knew he would make it, past whatever defenses Eric had set up. I kept in touch with him by means of the cards, and I learned of his encounters along the way. Like, ten thousand men dead in a plains battle with centaurs, five thousand lost in an earthquake of frightening proportions. Fifteen hundred dead of a whirlwind plague that swept the camps. Nineteen thousand dead or missing in action as they passed through the jungles of a place I didn't recognize, when the napalm fell upon them from the strange buzzing things that passed overhead. Six thousand deserting in a place that looked like the heaven they had been promised, five hundred unaccounted for as they crossed a sand flat where a mushroom cloud burned and towered beside them. Eighty-six hundred gone as they moved through a valley of suddenly militant machines that rolled forward on treads and fired fires, eight hundred sick and abandoned, two hundred dead from flash floods, fifty-four dying of duels among themselves, three hundred dead from eating poisonous native fruits, a thousand slain in a massive stampede of buffalo-like creatures, seventy-three gone when their tents caught fire, fifteen hundred carried away by the floods, two thousand slain by the winds that came down from the blue hills.

I was pleased that I'd lost only a hundred and eighty-six ships in that time.

To sleep, perchance to dream...Yeah, there's a thing that rubs. Eric was killing us by inches and hours. His proposed coronation was only a few weeks away, and he obviously knew we were coming against him, because we died and we died.

Now, it is written that only a prince of Amber may walk among Shadows, though of course he may lead or direct as many as he chooses along such courses. We led our troops and saw them die, but of Shadow I have this to say: there is Shadow and there is Substance, and this is the root of all things. Of Substance, there is only Amber, the real city, upon the real Earth, which contains everything. Of Shadow, there is an infinitude of things. Every possibility exists

somewhere as a Shadow of the real. Amber, by its very existence, has cast such in all directions. And what may one say of it beyond? Shadow extends from Amber to Chaos, and all things are possible within it. There are only three ways of traversing it, and each of them is difficult.

If one is a prince or princess of the blood, then one may walk, crossing through Shadows, forcing one's environment to change as one passes, until it is finally in precisely the shape one desires it, and there stop. The Shadow world is then one's own, save for family intrusions, to do with as one would. In such a place had I dwelled for centuries.

The second means is the cards, cast by Dworkin, Master of the Line, who had created them in our image, to facilitate communications between members of the royal family. He was the ancient artist to whom space and perspective meant nothing. He had made up the family Trumps, which permitted the willer to touch his brethren wherever they might be. I had a feeling that these had not been used in full accord with their author's intention.

The third was the Pattern, also drawn by Dworkin, which could only be walked by a member of our family. It initiated the walker into the system of the cards, as it were, and at its ending gave its walker the power to stride across Shadows.

The cards and the Pattern made for instant transport from Substance through Shadow. The other way, walking, was harder.

I knew what Random had done in delivering me into the true world. As we had driven, he kept adding, from memory, that which he recalled of Amber, and subtracting that which did not agree. When everything corresponded, he knew we had arrived. It was no real trick, for had he the knowledge, any man could reach his own Amber. Even now, Bleys and I could find Shadow Ambers where each of us ruled, and spend all of time and eternity ruling there. But this would not be the same, for us. For none would be the true Amber, the city into which were born, the city from which all others take their shapes.

So we were taking the hardest route, the walk through Shadow, for our invasion of Amber itself. Anyone knowing this and possessing the power could interpose obstacles. Eric had done so, and now we faced them as we died. What would come of this? No one knew.

But if Eric were crowned king, it would be reflected and shadowed everywhere.

All the surviving brothers, we princes of Amber, I am sure, felt it much better, each in his own simple way, personally to achieve this status and thereafter let the Shadows fall where they might.

We passed ghost fleets, the ships of Gerard, as we sailed-the Flying Dutchmen of this world-that world, and we knew we were coming near. I used them as reference points.

On the eighth day of our voyaging we were near to Amber. That is when the storm broke.

The sea turned dark, the clouds collected overhead, and the sails grew slack within the still that followed. The sun hid its face-an enormous blue one-and I felt that Eric had found us at last.

Then the winds arose, and-if you'll excuse the expression-broke-upon the vessel I rode.

We were tempest-tossed and storm-torn, as the poets say. or said. My guts felt loose and watery as the first billows hit us. We were hurled from side to side like dice in a giant's hand. We were swept over the waters of the sea and the waters from the sky. The sky turned black, and there was sleet mixed in with the glassy bell ropes that pulled the thunder. Everyone, I'm sure, cried out. I know I did. I pulled my way along the shifting deck to seize the abandoned wheel. I strapped myself in place and held it. Eric had cut loose in Amber, that was for damn sure.

One, two, three, four, and there was no letup. Five hours, then. How many men had we lost? I dunno.

Then I felt and heard a tingling and a tinkling, and I saw Bleys as through a long gray tunnel.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "I've been trying to reach you."

"Life is full of vicissitudes," I replied. "We're riding out one of them."

"Storm?" he said.

"You bet your sweet ass. It's the granddaddy of them all. I think I see a monster off to port. If he has any brains, he'll aim for the bottom. . . . He just did."

"We just had one ourselves," Bleys told me.

"Monster or storm?"

"Storm," he replied. "Two hundred dead."

"Keep the faith," I said, "hold the fort, and talk to me later. Okay?"

He nodded, and there were lightnings at his back.

"Eric's got our number," be added, before he cut off.

I had to agree.

It was three more hours before things let up, and many more later I learned that we had lost half of the fleet (and on my vessel-the flagship-we had lost forty of the crew of one hundred and twenty). It was a hard rain that fell.

Somehow, to the sea over Rebma, we made it.

I drew forth my cards and held Random's before me.

When he realized who was talking. the first thing he said was "Turn back," and I asked him why.

" 'Cause, according to Llewella, Eric can cream you now. She says wait a while, till he relaxes, and hit him then-like a year from now,

maybe."

I shook my head.

"Sorry," said I. "Can't. Too many losses involved in getting us this far. It's a now-or-never situation."

He shrugged, wearing a "Like, I warned you" expression.

"Why. though?" I asked him.

"Mainly because I just learned he can control the weather around here," he said.

"We'll still have to chance it."

He shrugged again.

"Don't say I didn't tell you."

"He definitely knows we're coming?"

"What do you think? Is he a cretin?"

"No."

"Then he knows. If I could guess it in Rebma, then he knows in Amber-and I did guess, from a wavering of Shadow."

"Unfortunately," I said, "I have some misgivings about this expedition, but it's Bleys' show."

"You cop out and let him get axed."

"Sorry, but I can't take the chance. He might win. I'm bringing in the fleet."

"You've spoken with Caine, with Gerard?"

"Yes."

"Then you must think you have a chance upon the waters. But listen, Eric has figured a way to control the Jewel of Judgment, I gather, from court gossip about its double. He can use it to control the weather here. That's definite. God knows what else he might be able to do with it."

"Pity," I said. "We'll have to suffer it. Can't let a few storms demoralize us."

"Corwin, I'll confess. I spoke with Eric himself three days ago."

"Why?"

"He asked me. I spoke with him out of boredom. He went into great detail concerning his defenses."

"That's because he learned from Julian that we came in together. He's sure it'll get back to me."

"Probably," he said. "But that doesn't change what he said."

"No," I agreed.

"Then let Bleys fight his own war," he told me. "You can hit Eric later."

"He's about to be crowned in Amber."

"I know, I know. It's as easy to attack a king, though, as a prince. isn't it? What difference does it make what he calls himself at the time, so long as you take him? It'll still be Eric."

"True," I said, "but I've committed myself."

"Then uncommit yourself," he said.

" 'Fraid I can't do that."

"Then you're crazy, Charlie."

"Probably."

"Well, good luck, anyhow."

"Thanks."

"See you around."

And that was that, and it troubled me.

Was I heading into a trap?

Eric was no fool. Perhaps he had a real death-gig lined up. Finally, I shrugged and leaned out over the rail, the cards once again behind my belt.

It is a proud and lonely thing to be a prince of Amber, incapable of trust. I wasn't real fond of it just then, but there I was.

Eric, of course, had controlled the storm we'd just passed through, and it seemed in line with his being weather master in Amber, as Random had told me.

So I tried something myself.

I headed us toward an Amber lousy with snow. It was the most horrible blizzard I could conjure up.

The big flakes began to fall, out there on the ocean.

Let him stop them a normal enough Shadow offering, if he could.

And he did.

Within a half hour's time the blizzard had died, Amber was virtually impervious-and it was really the only city. I didn't want to go off course, so I let things be. Eric was master of the weather in Amber.

What to do?

We sailed on, of course. Into the jaws of death,

What can one say?

The second storm was worse than the first, but I held the wheel. It was electrified, and focused only on the fleet. It drove us apart. It cost us forty vessels more.

I was afraid to call Bleys to see what had been done to him.

"Around two hundred thousand troops are left," he said. "Flash flood," and I told him what Random had told me.

"I'll buy it," he said. "But let's not dwell on it. Weather or no, we'll beat him."

"I hope so."

I lit a cigarette and leaned across the bow.

Amber should be coming into sight soon, I knew the ways of Shadow now, and I knew how to get there by walking.

But everyone had misgivings.

There would never be a perfect day, though.

So we sailed on, and the darkness came upon us like a sudden wave, and the worst storm of them all struck.

We managed to ride out its black lashings, but I was scared. It was all true, and we were in northern waters. If Caine had kept his word, all well and good. If he was getting us out, he was in an excellent position.

So I assumed he had sold us out. Why not? I prepared the fleet-seventy-three vessels remaining-for battle, when I saw him approach. The cards had lied-or else been very correct-when they'd pointed to him as the key figure.

The lead vessel headed toward my own, and I moved forward to meet it. We hove to, and side by side regarded one another. We could have communicated via the Trumps, but Caine didn't choose to; and he was in the stronger position. Therefore, family etiquette required that he choose his own means. He obviously wanted to be on record as he called out, through an amplifier:

"Corwin! Kindly surrender command of your fleet! I've got you outnumbered. You can't make it through!"

I regarded him across the waves and raised my own amplifier to my lips.

"What of our arrangement?" I asked.

"Null and void," he said. "Your force is far too weak to hurt Amber, so save lives and surrender it now."

I looked over my left shoulder and regarded the sun.

"Pray hear me, brother Caine," said I, "and grant me this then: give me your leave to confer with my captains till the sun stands in high heaven."

"Very well," he replied, without hesitation. "They appreciate their positions, I'm sure."

I turned away then and ordered that the ship he turned about and headed back in the direction of the main body of vessels.

If I tried to flee, Caine would pursue me through the Shadows and destroy the ships, one by one. Gunpowder did not ignite on the real Earth, but if we moved very far away, it too would he employed to our undoing. Caine would find some, for it was probable, were I to depart, the fleet could not sail the Shadow seas without me, and would be left as sitting ducks upon the real waters here. So the crews were either dead or prisoners, whatever I did.

Random had been right.

I drew forth Bleys' Trump and concentrated till it moved.

"Yes?" he said, and his voice was agitated. I could almost hear the sounds of battle about him.

"We're in trouble," I said. "Seventy-three ships made it through, and Caine has called on us to surrender by noon."

"Damn his eyes!" said Bleys. "I haven't made it as far as you. We're in the middle of a fight now. An enormous cavalry force is cutting us to pieces. So I can't counsel you fairly. I've got my own problems. Do as you see fit. They're coming again!" And the contact was broken.

I drew forth Gerard's, and sought contact.

When we spoke it seemed I could see a shore line behind him. I seemed to recognize it. If my guess was correct, he was in southern waters. I don't like to remember our conversation. I asked him if he could help me against Caine, and if he would.

"I only agreed to let you by," he said. "That is why I withdrew to the south. I couldn't reach you in time if I wanted to. I did not agree to help you kill our brother."

And before I could reply, he was gone. He was right, of course. He'd agreed to give me an opportunity, not to fight my battle for me.

What then did that leave me?

I lit a cigarette. I paced the deck. It was no longer morning. The mists had long vanished and the sun warmed my shoulders. Soon it would be noon. Perhaps two hours.

I fingered my cards, weighed the deck in my hand. I could try a contest of wills through them, with either Eric or Caine. There was that power present, and perhaps even others of which I knew nothing. They had been so designed, at the command of Oberon, by the hand of the mad artist Dworkin

Barimen, that wild-eyed hunchback who had been a sorcerer, priest, or psychiatrist-the stories conflicted on this point-from some distant Shadow where Dad had saved him from a disastrous fate he had brought upon himself. The details were unknown, but he had always been a bit off his rocker since that time. Still, he was a great artist, and it was undeniable that he possessed some strange power. He had vanished ages ago, after creating the cards and tracing the Pattern in Amber. We had often speculated about him, but no one seemed to know his whereabouts. Perhaps Dad had done him in, to keep his secrets secret.

Caine would be ready for such an attack, and I probably couldn't break him, though I might be able to hold him. Even then, though, his captains had doubtless been given the order to attack.

Eric would surely be ready for anything, but if there was nothing else left to do, I might as well try it. I had nothing to lose but my soul.

Then there was the card for Amber itself. I could take myself there with it and try an assassination, but I figured the odds were about a million to one against my living to effect it.

I was willing to die fighting, but it was senseless for all these men to go down with me. Perhaps my blood was tainted, despite my power over the Pattern. A true prince of Amber should have had no such

qualms. I decided then that my centuries on the Shadow Earth had changed me, softened me perhaps, had done something to me which made me unlike my brothers.

I decided to surrender the fleet and then transport myself to Amber and challenge Eric to a final duel. He'd be foolish to accept. But what the hell-I had nothing else left to do.

I turned to make my wishes known to my officers, and the power fell upon me, and I was stricken speechless.

I felt the contact and I finally managed to mutter "Who?" through clenched teeth. There was no reply, but a twisting thing bored slowly within my mind and I wrestled with it there.

After a time when he saw that I could not be broken without a long struggle, I heard Eric's voice upon the wind:

"How goes the world with thee, brother?" he inquired.

"Poorly," I said or thought, and he chuckled, though his voice seemed strained by the efforts of our striving.

"Too bad," be told me. "Had you come back and supported me, I would have done well by you. Now, of course, it is too late. Now, I will only rejoice when I have broken both you and Bleys."

I did not reply at once, but fought him with all the power I possessed. He withdrew slightly before it, but he succeeded in holding me where I stood.

If either of us dared divert his attention for an Instant, we could come into physical contact or one of us get the upper hand on the mental plane. I could see him now, clearly, in his chambers in the palace. Whichever of us made such a move, though, he would fall beneath the other's control.

So we glared at each other and struggled internally. Well, he had solved one of my problems, by attacking me first. He held my Trump in his left hand and his brows were furrowed. I sought for an edge, but couldn't find one. People were talking to me but I couldn't hear their words as I stood there backed against the rail.

What time was it?

All sense of time had departed since the beginning of the struggle. Could two hours have passed? Was that it? I couldn't be sure.

"I feel your troubled thought," said Eric. "Yes, I am coordinated with Caine. He contacted me after your parley. I can hold you thus while your fleet is demolished around you and sent down to Rebma to rot. The fishes will eat your men."

"Wait," I said. "They are guiltless. Bleys and I have misled them, and they think we are in the right. Their deaths would serve no purpose. I was preparing to surrender the fleet."

"Then you should not have taken so long," he replied, "for now it is too late. I cannot call Caine to countermand my orders, without

releasing you, and the moment I release you I will fall beneath your mental domination or suffer physical assault. Our minds are too proximate."

"Supposing I give you my word that I won't do this thing?"

"Any man would be forsworn to gain a kingdom," said Eric.

"Can't you read the thought? Can't you feel it within my mind? I'll keep my word!"

"I feel there is a strange compassion for these men you have duped, and I know not what may have caused such a bond, but no. You know it yourself. Even if you are sincere at this moment-as you well may be-the temptation will be too great the instant the opportunity occurs. You know it yourself. I can't risk it."

And I knew it. Amber burned too strongly In the blood of us.

"Your swordsmanship has increased remarkably," he commented. "I see that your exile has done you some good in that respect. You are closer to being my equal now than anyone save Benedict, who may well be dead."

"Don't flatter yourself," I said. "I know I can take you now. In fact-"

"Don't bother. I won't duel with you at this late date," and he smiled, reading my thought, which burned all too clearly.

"I more than half wish you had stood by me," he said. "I could have used you more than any of the others. Julian I spit upon. Caine is a coward. Gerard is strong, but stupid."

I decided to put in the only good word I might.

"Listen," I said. "I conned Random into coming here with me. He wasn't hot on the idea. I think he would have supported you, had you asked him."

"That bastard!" he said. "I wouldn't trust him to empty chamber pots. One day I'd find a piranha in mine. No thanks. I might have pardoned him, save for your present recommendation. You'd like me to clasp him to my bosom and call him brother now, wouldn't you? Oh no! You leap too quickly to his defense. It reveals his true attitude, of which he has doubtless made you aware. Let us forget Random in the courts of clemency."

I smelled smoke then and heard the sounds of metal on metal. That would mean that Caine had come upon us and was doing his job.

"Good," said Eric, catching it from my mind.

"Stop them! Please! My men don't have a chance against that many!"

"Not even were you to yield-" and he bit it off and cursed. I caught the thought, then. He could have asked me to yield in return for their lives, and then let Caine continue with the slaughter. He would have liked to have done that, but he'd let those first words slip

out in the heat of his passion.

I chuckled at his irritation.

"I'll have you soon, anyhow," be said. "As soon as they take the flagship."

"Until then," I said, "try this!" And I hit him with everything I had, boring into his mind, hurting him with my hatred. I felt his pain and it drove me harder. For all the years of exile I'd spent, I lashed at him, seeking at least this payment. For his putting me through the plague, I beat at the barriers of his sanity, seeking this vengeance. For the auto accident, for which I knew he had been responsible, I struck at him, seeking some measure of anguish in return for my hurt.

His control began to slip and my frenzy increased. I bore down upon him and his hold upon me began to slacken.

Finally, "You devil!" he cried, and moved his band to cover the card that he held.

The contact was broken, and I stood there shaking.

I had done it. I had bested him in a contest of wills. No longer would I fear my tyrant brother in any form of single combat. I was stronger than he.

I sucked in several deep breaths and stood erect, ready for the moment the coldness of a new mental attack occurred. I knew that it wouldn't, though, not from Eric. I sense that he feared my fury.

I looked about me and there was fighting. There was already blood on the decks. A ship had come alongside us and we were being boarded. Another vessel was attempting the same maneuver on the opposite side. A bolt whistled by my head.

I drew my blade and leaped into the fray.

I don't know how many I slew that day. I lost count somewhere after number twelve or thirteen. It was more than twice that, on that engagement alone, though. The strength with which a prince of Amber is naturally endowed, which had allowed me to lift a Mercedes, served me that day, so that I could raise a man with one hand and hurl him over the rail.

We slew everyone aboard both boarding ships and opened their hatches and sent them down to Rebma where Random would be amused by the carnage. My crew had been cut in half in the battle, and I had suffered innumerable nicks and scratches but nothing serious. We went to the aid of a sister vessel and knocked off another of Caine's raiders.

The survivors of the rescued vessel came aboard the flagship and I had a full crew once more.

"Blood!" I called out. "Give me blood and vengeance this day, my warriors, and you will be remembered in Amber forever!"

And as a man. they raised their weapons and cried out, "Blood!"

And gallons-no, rivers-of it were let that day. We destroyed two more of Caine's raiders, replenishing our numbers from those of the survivors of our own fleet. As we headed toward a sixth, I climbed the mainmast and tried to take a quick count.

We looked to be outnumbered three to one. There seemed to be between forty-five and fifty-five remaining of my fleet.

We took the sixth, and we didn't have to look for the seventh and the eighth. They came to us. We took them too, but I received several wounds in the fighting that again left me with half a crew. My left shoulder and my right thigh had been cut deeply, and a slash along my right hip was hurting.

As we sent those ships to the bottom, two more moved toward us,

We fled and gained an ally in one of my own ships which had been victorious in its own recent battle. We combined crews once more, this time transferring the standard to the other vessel, which had been less damaged than my own, which had begun shipping water badly and was beginning to list to starboard.

We were allowed no breathing space, as another vessel neared and the men attempted to board.

My men were tired, and I was getting that way. Fortunately the other crew wasn't in such great shape either. Before the second of Caine's vessels came to its aid, we had overwhelmed it, boarded, and transferred the standard again. That ship had been in even better shape.

We took the next and I was left with a good ship, forty men, and gasping.

There was no one in sight to come to our aid now. All of my surviving ships were engaged by at least one of Caine's. A raider was heading toward us and we fled.

We gained perhaps twenty minutes this way. I tried to sail into Shadow, but it's a hard, slow thing that near to Amber. It's much easier to get this close than it is to depart, because Amber is the center, the nexus. If I'd had another ten minutes, I could have made it.

I didn't, though.

As the vessel hove nearer, I saw another one off in the distance turning in our direction. It bore the black and green standard beneath Eric's colors and the white unicorn. It was Caine's ship. He wanted to be there for the kill.

We took the first one and didn't even have time to open its hatches before Caine was upon us. I was left standing on the bloody deck, with a dozen men about me, and Caine moved to the bow of his ship and called upon me to surrender.

"Will you grant my men their lives if I do this thing?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said. "I'd lose a few crewmen myself if I didn't, and

there's no need for that."

"On your word as a prince?" I asked.

He thought about it a moment, then nodded.

"Very well." he said. "Have your men lay down their arms and board my vessel when I come alongside."

I sheathed my blade and nodded about me.

"You have fought the good fight. and I love you for it," I said. "But we have lost in this place." I dried my hands on my cloak as I spoke and wiped them carefully, as I'd hate to smudge a work of art. "Lay down your arms and know that your exploits of this day will never be forgotten. One day I will praise you before the court of Amber."

The men, the nine big red ones and the three remaining hairy ones, wept as they put down their arms.

"Do not fear that all is lost in the struggle for the city," I said. "We have lost only one engagement and the battle still continues elsewhere. My brother Bleys hacks his way toward Amber at this moment. Caine will keep his word to spare your lives when he sees that I have gone to join with Bleys upon the land, for he would not have knowledge that he was forsworn come into Amber. I am sorry that I cannot take you with me."

And with this, I drew Bleys' Trump from the pack and held it low and before me, out of sight of the other vessel.

Just as Caine came alongside, there was movement beneath that cold, cold surface.

"Who?" Bleys asked.

"Corwin," I said. "How fare you?"

"We won the battle, but lost many troops. We're resting now before we renew the march. How go things with you?"

"I think we've destroyed nearly half of Caine's fleet, but he's won the day. He's about to board me now. Give me escape."

He held forth his hand and I touched it and collapsed into his arms.

"This is getting to be a habit," I muttered, and then I saw that he was wounded too, about the head, and there was a bandage around his left hand. "Had to grab the wrong end of a saber," he remarked, as he saw my eyes fall upon it. "It smarts."

I caught my breath and then we walked to his tent, where he opened a bottle of wine and gave me bread, cheese, and some dried meat. He still had plenty of cigarettes and I smoked one as a medical officer dressed my wounds.

He still had around a hundred and eighty thousand men behind him. As I stood on a hilltop and the evening began around me, it seemed as if I looked out over every camp I had ever stood within, stretching on and on over the miles and the centuries without end. I

suddenly felt tears come into my eyes, for the men who are not like the lords of Amber, living but a brief span and passing into dust, that so many of them must meet their ends upon the battlefields of the world.

I returned to Bleys' tent and we finished the bottle of wine.

Chapter 7

That night there was a bad storm. It hadn't let up when dawn struggled to cross the world's palm with silver, and it continued on through the day's march.

It is a very demoralizing thing to tramp along and be rained on, a cold rain at that. How I've always hated the mud, through which it seems I've spent centuries marching!

We sought after a shadow way that was free of rain, but nothing we did seemed to matter.

We could march to Amber, but we would do it with our clothing sticking to us, to the drumbeat of the thunder, with the flashing of the lightning at our backs.

The next night the temperature plummeted, and in the morning I stared past the stiff flags and regarded a world gone white beneath a gray sky, filled with flurries. My breath went back in plumes behind me.

The troops were ill-equipped for this, save for the hairy ones, and we got them all moving quickly, to prevent frostbite. The big red guys suffered. Theirs had been a very warm world.

We were attacked by tiger. polar bear. and wolf that day. The tiger Bleys killed measured ever fourteen feet from tail tip to nose.

We marched on well into the night, and the thaw began. Bleys pushed the troops to get them out of the cold Shadows. The Trump for Amber indicated that a warm, dry autumn prevailed there, and we were nearing the real Earth.

By midnight on that second night we'd marched through slush and sleet, cold rains, warm rains, and on into a dry world.

The orders were given to make camp then, with triple security cordons. Considering the tired condition of the men we were ripe for an attack. But the troops were staggering and couldn't be pushed much further.

The attack came several hours later, and Julian led it, I learned later from the description given by survivors.

He headed commando raids against our most vulnerable campsites on the periphery of the main body. Had I known it to be Julian, I would have used his Trump to try to hold him, but I only knew it after the fact.

We'd lost perhaps two thousand men in the abrupt winter, and I didn't yet know how many Julian had accounted for.

It seemed the troops were beginning to get demoralized, but they followed when we ordered them ahead.

The next day was one continuous ambush. A body of men the size

of ours could not be allowed to deviate sufficiently to try to deal with the harassing raids Julian led against our flanks. We got some of his men, but not enough, one for every ten of ours, perhaps.

By high noon we were crossing the valley that paralleled the seacoast. The Forest of Arden was to the north and our left. Amber lay directly ahead. The breezes were cool and filled with the odors of earth and its sweet growing things. A few leaves fell. Amber lay eighty miles distant and was but a shimmer above the horizon.

That afternoon, with a gathering of clouds and but the lightest of rains, the

blots began to fall from the heavens. Then the storm ceased and the sun came forth to dry things off.

After a time, we smelled the smoke.

After another time, we saw it, flapping skyward all about us.

Then the sheets of flame began to rise and fall. They moved toward us, with their crunching. constant footsteps; and as they came nearer, we began to feel the heat, and somewhere, way back along the lines, a panic arose. There were cries, and the columns swelled and welled forward.

We began to run.

Flakes of ash were falling about us now, and the smoke grew thicker. We sprinted ahead and the flames rushed even closer. The sheets of light and heat flapped a steady, welling thunder as we ran, and the waves of warmth beat upon us, washed over us. Soon they were right there alongside us, and the trees blackened and the leaves flaked down, and some of the smaller trees began to sway. For as far ahead as we could see, our way was an alley of fires.

We ran faster. for soon things would be worse.

And we were not mistaken.

Big trees began to topple across our path. We leaped over them, we circled around them. At least, we were on a trail.

The heat became stifling and the breath came heavy in our lungs. Deer and wolves and foxes and rabbits darted past us, fleeing with us, ignoring our presence and that of their natural enemies. The air above the smoke seemed filled with crying birds. Their droppings fell among us, went unnoticed.

To burn this ancient wood. as venerable as the Forest of Arden, seemed almost an act of sacrilege to me. But Eric was prince in Amber, and soon to be king. I suppose I might have, too.

My eyebrows and hair were singed. My throat felt like a chimney. How many would this assault cost us? I wondered.

Seventy miles of wooded valley lay between us and Amber, and over thirty behind us, going back to the forest's end.

"Bleys!" I gasped. "Two or three miles ahead of us the trail forks!

The right branch comes more quickly to the river Oisen, which goes down to the sea! I think it's our one chance! The whole Valley of Garnath is going to be burned! Our only hope lies in reaching the water!"

He nodded.

We raced on, but the fires outpaced us.

We made it to the fork, though, beating out flames on our smoldering clothing. wiping ashes from our eyes, spitting such from our mouths, running hands through our hair when the flamelets nested there.

"Only about a quarter mile more," I said.

I had been struck several times by falling boughs. All the exposed areas of my skin pulsed with a more than feverish pain, and many of the covered areas as well. We ran through burning grasses, heading down a long slope, and when we reached the bottom we saw the water, and our speed increased, though we didn't think it possible. We plunged in and let the cold wetness embrace in.

Bleys and I contrived to float as near together as possible as the currents took us and we were swept along the twisting course of the Oisen. The interlocked branches of the trees overhead had become as the beams in a cathedral of fire. As they broke apart and collapsed in places, we had to turn onto our bellies and swim or dive for the deepest places, depending on how near we were. The waters about us were filled with hissing and blackened debris, and at our backs our surviving troops' heads in the river seemed as a strip of floating coconuts.

The waters were dark and cold and our wounds began to ache, and we shivered and our teeth chattered.

It was several miles before we left the burning wood and reached the low, flat, treeless place that led on to the sea. It would be a perfect place for Julian to be waiting, with archers, I decided. I mentioned this to Bleys and he agreed, but he didn't reckon there was much we could do about it. I was forced to agree.

The woods burned all around us, and we swam and we drifted.

It seemed like hours, but must have been less, before my fears began to materialize and the first volley of arrows descended.

I dove, and I swam underwater for a long distance. Since I was going with the current, I made it quite a way along the river before I had to surface once more.

As I did, more arrows fell about me.

The gods knew how long this gauntlet of death might be drawn, but I didn't want to stick around and find out.

I gulped air and dove once more.

I touched bottom, I felt my way among rocks.

I moved along for as far as I could, then headed toward the right bank, exhaling as I rose.

I burst through the surface, gasped, took a deep breath and went down again, without sticking around to get the lay of the land,

I swam on till my lungs were bursting, and surfaced then.

This time I wasn't quite so lucky. I took an arrow through my biceps. I managed to dive and break off the shaft when I struck bottom. Then I pulled out the head and continued on by means of the frog kick and underbody sculling with my right hand. The next time up I'd be a sitting duck, I knew.

So I forced myself on, till the red flashes crossed my eyeballs and the blackness crept into my head. I must have stayed down for three minutes.

When I surfaced this time, though, nothing happened, and I trod water and gasped.

I made my way to the left bank and grabbed hold of the trailing undergrowth.

I looked all around me. We were running short on trees at this point, and the fires hadn't gotten this far. Both banks seemed empty, but so did the river. Could I have been the only survivor? It didn't seem possible. After all, there had been so many of us when the last march began.

I was half dead with fatigue and my entire body was laced with aches and pains. Every inch of my skin seemed to have been burned, but the waters were so cold that I was shaking and probably blue. I'd have to leave the river soon, if I wanted to live. I felt that I could manage a few more underwater expeditions, and I decided to chance them before departing from the sheltering depths.

Somehow I managed four more laps, and I felt then that I might not come up again if I tried a fifth. So I hung onto a rock and caught my breath. then crawled ashore.

I rolled onto my back and looked all around. I didn't recognize the locale. The fires hadn't reached it yet, though. There was a thick clump of bushes off to my right and I crawled toward it, crawled into it, fell flat on my face and went to sleep.

When I awoke, I wished I hadn't. Every inch of me ached, and I was sick. I lay there for hours, half delirious, and finally managed to stagger back to the river for a long drink of water. Then I headed back for the thicket, made it, and slept again.

I was still sore when consciousness came once more, but a little bit stronger. I walked to the river and back, and by means of my icy Trump found that Bleys was still alive.

"Where are you?" he asked, when I had made the contact.

"Damned if I know," I replied. "Lucky to be anywhere at all. Near

the sea, though. I can hear the waves and I know the smell."

"You're near the river?"

"Yes."

"Which bank?"

"Left, as you'd face the sea. North."

"Then stay put," he told me, "and I'll send someone after you. I'm assembling our forces now. I've already got over two thousand together, and Julian won't come near us. More keep straggling in every minute,"

"Okay," I said, and that was it.

I stayed put. I slept as I did so.

I heard them bashing about in the bushes and was alert, I pushed some fronds aside and peered forth.

It was three of the big red guys.

So I straightened my gear and brushed all my garments, ran a hand through my hair, stood erect and swayed, took several deep breaths, and stepped forth,

"I am here," I announced.

Two of them did double-takes, blades in their hands, as I said it.

But they recovered, smiled, paid me deference, and conducted me back to the camp. It was perhaps two miles distant. I made it without leaning.

Bleys appeared and said, "We've got over three thousand now." Then he called for a medical officer to take care of me again.

We were undisturbed all through the night, and the rest of our troops straggled in that night and the following day.

We had perhaps five thousand by then. We could see Amber in the distance.

We slept another night and on the following morning we set forth.

By afternoon we had made maybe fifteen miles. We marched along the beach, and there was no sign of Julian anywhere.

The feeling of pain from my burns began to subside. My thigh was healthy, but my shoulder and arm still hurt from here to hell and back again.

We marched on, and soon we were within forty miles of Amber. The weather stayed clement and all of the wood to our left was a desolate, blackened ruin. The fire had destroyed most of the timber in the valley, so for once there was a thing in our favor. Julian nor anybody else could ambush us. We'd see them coming a mile off. We made another ten miles ere the sun fell and we bivouacked on the beach.

The next day, I remembered that Eric's coronation was near at hand and I reminded Bleys. We had almost lost count of the days, but

realized we still had a few remaining.

We led a speed-march till noon. then rested. By then, we were twenty-five miles away from the foot of Kolvir. By twilight, the distance was ten.

And we kept on. We marched till midnight and we bivouacked once again. By that time, I was beginning to feel fairly alive once more. I practiced a few cuts with my blade and could almost manage them. The next day, I felt even better.

We marched until we came to the foot of Kolvir, where we were met by all of Julian's forces, combined with many from Caine's fleet who now stood as foot soldiers.

Bleys stood there and called things, like Robert E. Lee at Chancellorsville, and we took them.

We bad maybe three thousand men when we had finished off everything Julian had to throw against us. Julian, of course, escaped.

But we had won. There was celebration that night. We had won.

I was very afraid by then, and I made my fears known to Bleys. Three thousand men again Kolvir.

I had lost the fleet, and Bleys had lost over ninety-eight percent of his foot soldiers. I did not look upon these as rejoiceable items.

I didn't like it.

But the next day we began the ascent. There was a stairway, allowing for the men to go two abreast along it. This would narrow soon, however, forcing us to go single file.

We made it a hundred yards up Kolvir, then two, then three.

Then the storm blew in from the sea, and we held tight and were lashed by it.

Afterward, a couple of hundred men were missing.

We struggled on and the rains came down. The way grew steeper, more slippery. A quarter of the way up Kolvir we met with a column of armed men descending. The first of these traded blows with the leaders of our vanguard, and two men fell. Two steps were gained, and another man fell.

This went on for over an hour, and by then we were about a third of the way up and our line was wearing back toward Bleys and myself. It was good that our big red warriors were stronger than Eric's troops. There would come a clash of arms, a cry, and a man would be brought by. Sometimes he would be red, occasionally furry, but more often he wore Eric's colors.

We made it to the halfway point, fighting for every step. Once we reached the top, there would be the broad stair of which the one to Rebma had been but an image. It would lead up to the Great Arch, which was the eastern entranceway to Amber.

Perhaps fifty of our vanguard remained. Then forty, thirty,

twenty, ...

We were about two-thirds of the way up by then, and the stair zigged and zagged its way back and forth across the face of Kolvir. The eastern stair is seldom used. It is almost a decoration. Our original plans had been to cut through the now blackened valley and then circle, climbing, and to take the western way over the mountains and enter Amber from behind. The fire and Julian had changed all this. We'd never have made it up and around. It was now a frontal assault or nothing. And it wasn't going to be nothing.

Three more of Eric's warriors fell and we gained four steps. Then our front man made the long descent and we lost one.

The breeze was sharp and cool from off the sea, and birds were collecting at the foot of the mountain. The sun broke through the clouds, as Eric apparently put aside his weather making now that we were engaged with his force.

We gained six steps and lost another man.

It was strange and sad and wild....

Bleys stood before me, and soon his turn would come. Then mine, should he perish.

Six of the vanguard remained,

Ten steps...

Then five remained.

We pushed on, slowly, and there was blood on every step for as far back as I could see. There's a moral there, somewhere.

The fifth man slew four before he fell himself, so bringing us to another zig, or zag, as the case may be.

Onward and upward, our third man fighting with a blade in either hand. It was good that he fought in a holy war, for there was real zeal behind each blow. He took three before he died.

The next wasn't as zealous, or as good with his blades. He fell immediately, and then there were two.

Bleys drew his long, filigreed blade, and its edge sparkled in the sun.

"Soon, brother," he said, "we will see what they can do against a prince."

"Only one, I hope." I replied. and he chuckled.

I'd say we were three-quarters of the way there when Bleys' turn finally came.

He leaped forward, immediately dislodging the first man to face him. The point of his blade found the throat of the second, and the flat of it fell alongside the head of the third, dislodging him also. He dueled a moment with the fourth and dispatched him.

My own blade was in my hand, ready, as I watched and advanced.

He was good, even better than I remembered him to be. He advanced like a whirlwind, and his blade was alive with light. They fell before it-how they fell, my friend! Whatever else you might say of Bleys, on that day he acquitted himself as became his rank. I wondered how long he could keep going.

He'd a dagger in his left hand, which he used with brutal efficiency whenever he could manage a corps à corps. He left it in the throat of his eleventh victim.

I could see no end to the column which opposed us. I decided that it must stretch all the way to the landing at the top. I hoped my turn wouldn't come. I almost believed it.

Three more men plummeted past me and we came to a small landing and a turn. He cleared the landing and began the ascent. For half an hour I watched him, and they died and they died. I could hear the murmurs of awe from the men behind me. I almost thought he could make it to the top.

He used every trick available. He baffled blades and eyes with his cloak. He tripped the warriors. He seized wrists and twisted, with his full strength.

We made it to another landing. There was some blood on his sleeve by then, but he smiled constantly, and the warriors behind the warriors he killed were ashen. This helped him, too. And perhaps the fact that I stood ready to fill the gap also contributed to their fears and so slowed them, worked on their nerves. They'd heard of the naval engagement, I later learned.

Bleys worked his way to the next landing, cleared it, turned again, began to ascend. I hadn't thought he could make it that far, then. I didn't think I could make it as far as he had. It was the most phenomenal display of swordsmanship and endurance I'd seen since Benedict had held the pass above Arden against the Moonriders out of Ghenesh.

He was tiring, though, I could see that, too. If only there were some way for me to relieve him, to spell him for a time.

But there wasn't. So I followed, fearing every stroke might be his last.

I knew that he was weakening. We were within a hundred feet of the top at that point.

I suddenly felt for him. He was my brother and he'd done well by me. I don't think he thought he'd make it then, yet he was fighting on . . . in effect, giving me my chance for the throne.

He killed three more men, and his blade moved more slowly each time. He fought with the fourth for perhaps five minutes before he took him. I was certain the next would he his last.

He wasn't, though.

As he slew that man, I transferred my blade from my right hand to my left, drew my dagger with my right and threw it.

It went in up to the hilt, in the throat of the next man. Bleys sprang over two steps and hamstrung the man before him, casting him downward.

Then he cut upward, ripping open the belly of the one behind that one.

I rushed to fill the gap, to be tight behind him and ready. He didn't need me yet, though.

He took the next two, with a new burst of energy. I called for another dagger and one was passed to me from somewhere along the line.

I kept it ready till he slowed once more, and I used it on the man he fought.

The man was lunging as it spun in, so the hilt rather than the blade caught him. It struck against his head, though, and Bleys pushed against his shoulder and he fell. But the next man leaped forward, and though he impaled himself, he struck Bleys upon the shoulder and they went over the edge together.

By reflex, almost without knowing what I was doing, yet knowing fully in one of those microsecond decisions you justify after the fact, my left hand leaped to my belt, whipped out my pack of the Trumps and cast them toward Bleys as he seemed to hang there for an instant-so rapidly did my muscles and perceptions respond-and I cried out, "Catch them, you fool!"

And he did.

I didn't have time to see what happened next, as I parried and thrust.

Then began the final lap of our journey up Kolvir.

Let's just say I made it and was gasping, as my troops came over the edge to support me there on the landing.

We consolidated our forces and pressed ahead.

It took us an hour to reach the Great Arch.

We passed through. We entered Amber.

Wherever Eric was, I'm sure he'd never guessed we'd make it this far.

And I wondered where Bleys was? Had he gotten a chance to grab a Tramp and use it, before he reached the bottom? I guessed that I'd never know.

We had underestimated, all the way around. We were outnumbered now, and the only thing left to do was to fight on for as long as we could hold out. Why had I done such a foolish thing as throw Bleys my Trumps? I knew he had none of his own and that's what had dictated my response, conditioned perhaps by my years on

the Shadow Earth, But I might have used them to escape, if things went badly.

Things went badly.

We fought on until twilight, and by then there was only a small band of us remaining.

We were surrounded at a point a thousand yards within Amber, and still far from the palace. We were fighting a defensive fight, and one by one we died. We were overwhelmed.

LIewella or Deirdre would have given me sanctuary. Why had I done it?

I killed another man and put the question out of my mind.

The sun went down and darkness filled the sky. We were down to a few hundred by then, and not much closer to the palace.

Then I saw Eric and heard him shouting orders. If only I could reach him!

But I couldn't.

I'd probably have surrendered, to save my remaining troops, who had served me far too well.

But there was no one to surrender to, no one asking for a surrender. Eric couldn't even hear me if I cried out. He was out of the way, directing. So we fought on, and I was down to a hundred men.

Let's be brief.

They killed everyone but me.

At me they threw nets and unleashed blunted arrows.

Finally, I fell and was clubbed and hog-tied, and then everything went away but a nightmare which attached itself and wouldn't let go, no matter what.

We had lost.

I awoke in a dungeon far below Amber, sorry that I had made it that far.

The fact that I still lived meant that Eric had plans for me. I visualized racks and braces, flames and tongs. I foresaw my coming degradation as I lay there on the damp straw.

How long had I been unconscious? I did not know.

I searched my cell for a means of committing suicide. I found nothing that would serve this purpose.

All my wounds blazed like suns, and I was so very tired.

I lay me down and slept once more.

I awakened, and still no one came to me. There was none to buy, none to torture.

Also, there was nothing for me to eat.

I lay there, wrapped in my cloak, and I reviewed everything that had happened since I'd awakened in Greenwood and refused my hypo. Better, perhaps, if I hadn't.

I knew despair.

Soon Eric would be crowned king in Amber. This thing might already have occurred.

But sleep was so lovely a thing, and I so tired.

It was the first real chance I'd had to rest and forget my wounds.

The cell was so dark arid smelly and damp.

Chapter 8

How many times I awakened and returned to sleep, I do not know. Twice I found bread and meat and water on a tray by the door. Both times, I emptied the tray. My cell was almost pitch dark and very chilly. I waited there, and I waited.

Then they came for me.

The door swung open and a feeble light entered. I blinked at it as I was called forth.

The corridor without was filled to overflowing with armed men, so I wasn't about to try anything.

I rubbed at the stubble on my chin and went where they took me.

After a long walk, we came to the hall of the spiral stair and began to ascend. I asked no questions as we moved, and no one offered me any information.

When we reached the top, I was conducted further into the palace proper. They took me to a warm, clean room and ordered me to strip, which I did. Then I entered a steaming tub of water, and a servant came forth and scrubbed me and shaved me and trimmed my hair.

When I was dry again, I was given fresh garments, of black and of silver.

I donned them, and a black cloak was hung about my shoulders, its clasp a silver rose.

"You are ready," said the sergeant of the guard. "Come this way."

I followed him, and the guard followed me.

I was taken far to the back of the palace where a smith placed manacles about my wrists, fetters on my ankles, with chains upon them too heavy for me to break. Had I resisted, I knew I would have been beaten unconscious and the result would have been the same. I had no desire to be beaten unconscious again, so I complied.

Then the chains were taken up by several of the guards, and I was led back toward the front of the palace. I had no eyes for the magnificence that lay all about me. I was a prisoner. I would probably soon be dead or on the rack. There was nothing I could do right now. A glance out of the window showed me that it was early evening, and there was no place for nostalgia as I passed through rooms where we had played as children.

I was led up a long corridor and into the great dining room.

There were tables all over the place, and people seated all about them, many of whom I knew.

All the fine gowns and suits of Amber burned about me on the bodies of the nobles, and there was music beneath the torchlight and food already upon the tables, though no one was eating yet.

I saw faces that I recognized, like Flora's, and some strange faces. There was the minstrel. Lord Rein-yes, he had been knighted, by me-whom I had not seen in centuries. He turned his eyes away when my gaze fell upon him.

I was taken to the foot of the huge center table and seated there.

The guards stayed and stood behind me. They fastened the ends of my chains to rings fresh-set in the floor. The seat at the head of my table was as yet unoccupied.

I did not recognize the woman to my right, but the man to my left was Julian. I ignored him and stared at the lady, a little wisp of a blonde.

"Good evening," I said. "I don't believe we've been introduced. My name is Corwin."

She looked at the man at her right for support, a heavy, redheaded guy with lots of freckles. He looked away and suddenly became engaged in an animated conversation with the woman to his right.

"It's all right to talk with me, honest," I said. "It's not contagious.

She managed a weak smile and said, "I'm Carmel. How are you, Prince Corwin?"

"That's a sweet name," I replied, "and I'm just fine. What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

She took a quick drink of water.

"Corwin," said Julian, louder than necessary. "I think the lady finds you offensive and obnoxious."

"What's she said to you so far this evening?" and he didn't blush. He whitened.

"That will be enough from you."

I stretched then, and rattled my chains on purpose. Outside of the effect it produced, it also showed me how much slack I had. Not enough, of course. Eric had been careful.

"Come closer and whisper me your objections, brother," I said.

But he didn't.

I had been the last to be seated, so I knew the time was near at hand. And it was.

There came five trumpet notes from six trumpets and Eric entered the hall.

Everybody stood.

Except for me.

The guards had to drag me to my feet by means of the chains and hold me there.

Eric smiled and descended the stair to my right. I could barely see his own colors beneath the ermine robe that he wore.

He moved to the head of the table and stood before his chair. A

servant came and stood behind him, and the wine stewards made their rounds, pouring.

When all the glasses were filled, he raised his.

"May you dwell forever in Amber," he said, "which endureth forever," and everyone raised his glass.

Except for me.

"Pick it up!" said Julian.

"Shove it up," said I.

He didn't, only glared. But I leaned forward quickly then and raised my glass.

There were a couple hundred people between us, but my voice carried. And Eric's eyes were upon me all the while, as I said, "To Eric, who sits at the foot of the table!"

No one moved to touch me as Julian emptied his glass upon the floor. All the others did the same, but I managed to quaff most of mine, before it was struck from my hand.

Eric seated himself then and the nobles followed suit, and I was released to fall into my chair.

The serving began, and since I was hungry I ate as well as the rest of them, and better than most.

There was constant music and the meal lasted for over two hours. No one said a word to me during the whole time, and I said nothing more myself. But my presence was felt, and our table was quieter than the others.

Caine sat farther up along the table. At Eric's right hand. I gathered that Julian was out of favor. Neither Random nor Dierdre was present. There were many other nobles whom I recognized. some of whom I had once counted as friends, but none of these would return my glances.

I gathered then that it only required a small formality for Eric to be king in Amber.

And this followed shortly.

After dinner, there were no speeches Eric simply stood.

There came another flash of trumpets and a raucous sound upon the air.

Then there was a procession, leading all the way to the throne room of Amber.

I knew what was coming next.

Eric stood before the throne and everybody bowed.

Except for me, that is, and I was forced to my knees anyway.

Today was the day of his coronation.

There was silence. Then Caine bore in the cushion which held the crown, the crown of Amber. He knelt and froze in that position, offering it.

Then I was jerked to my feet and dragged forward. I knew what was about to happen. It came upon me in a flash, and I fought. But I was beaten down and brought to my knees at the foot of the stair before the throne.

The music rose up softly-it was "Greensleeves"-and somewhere at my back Julian said, "Behold the crowning of a new king in Amber!" Then to me, in a whisper, "Take up the crown and hand it to Eric. He will crown himself."

I stared at the crown of Amber upon the crimson cushion Caine held.

It was wrought of silver and had seven high points, each topped by a gem stone. It was studded with emeralds, and there were two huge rubies at either temple.

I didn't move, thinking of the times I had seen the face of our father beneath it.

"No," I said simply, and I felt a blow upon my left check.

"Take it and give it to Eric," he repeated.

I tried to strike at him, but my chains were drawn tight. I was struck again.

I stared at the high sharp peaks.

"Very well," I finally said, and reached for it.

I held it in both hands for a moment then quickly placed it on my own head and declared, "I crown me, Corwin, king of Amber!"

It was removed immediately and replaced upon the cushion. Several blows fell upon my back. There came a murmuring throughout the hall.

"Now pick it up and try it again," said Julian. "Take it and hand it to Eric."

Another blow fell.

"Okay," I told him, feeling my shirt grow wet.

This time I hurled it, hoping to put out one of Eric's eyes.

He caught it in his right hand and smiled down at me as I was beaten.

"Thank you," he said. "Now hear me, all you present, and those of you who listen in Shadow. I assume the crown and throne this day. I take into my hand the scepter of the kingdom of Amber. I have won the throne fairly, and I take it and hold it by the right of my blood."

"Liar!" I cried, and a hand was clapped over my mouth.

"I crown myself Eric the First, King of Amber."

"Long live the King!" cried the nobles, three times.

Then he leaned forward and whispered to me, "Your eyes have looked upon the fairest sight they will ever hold. . .. Guards! Take Corwin away to the smithy, and let his eyes be burnt from out his head! Let him remember the sights of this day as the last he might

ever see! Then cast him into the darkness of the deepest dungeon beneath Amber, and let his name be forgotten!"

I spat and was beaten.

I fought every step of the way, but was taken forth from the hall. No one would look upon me as I went, and the last thing I remember was the sight of Eric seated upon the throne, pronouncing his blessing upon the nobles of Amber, and smiling.

That which he said was done to me, and mercifully I fainted before it was finished.

I have no idea how much later it was that I awakened within absolute blackness and felt the terrible pains within my head. Perhaps it was then that I pronounced the curse, or perhaps it had been at the time that the whitehot irons had descended. I don't remember. But I knew that Eric would never rest easy upon the throne, for the curse of a prince of Amber, pronounced in a fullness of fury, is always potent.

I clawed at the straw, in the absolute blackness of my cell, and no tears came. That was the horror of it. After a time-only you and I, gods, know how long-sleep came again

When I awakened. there was still the pain. I rose to my feet. I measured off the dimensions of my cell. Four paces in width, five in length. There was a lavatory hole in the floor and a straw-tick mattress in a corner. The door contained a small slot at the bottom, and behind it there was a tray which held a stale piece of bread and a bottle of water. I ate and I drank, but I was not refreshed.

My head ached so, and there was nothing of peace within me.

I slept as much as I could, and no one came to see me. I awakened and crossed my cell and felt for food and ate it when I found it. I slept as much as I could.

After seven sleeps, the pain was gone from out my eye sockets. I hated my brother who was king in Amber. Better he had killed me.

I wondered at the popular reaction, but could not guess.

When the darkness reached as far as Amber, however, I knew that Eric would have his regrets. This much I knew, and this comforted me.

Thus began my days of darkness, and I had no way of measuring their passage. Even if I had had eyes, I could not have distinguished day from night in that place.

Time went on its way, ignoring me. There were occasions when I broke into a sweat over this and shivered. Had I been there months? Only hours? Or weeks? Or had it been years?

I forgot all about time. I slept, I paced (I knew exactly where to place my feet and when to turn), and I reflected upon things I had done and hadn't done. Sometimes I would sit cross-legged and breathe slowly and deeply, and empty my mind and keep it that way for as long as I could. This helped-thinking of nothing.

Eric had been clever. Although the power lived within me, now it was useless. A blind man cannot walk among Shadows.

My beard had grown down to my chest and my hair was long. I was always hungry at first, but after a time my appetite waned. Sometimes I grew dizzy when I stood up too rapidly.

I could still see, in my nightmares, but this hurt me even more when I awakened.

Later, though, I felt somewhat distant from the events which had led up to this. It was almost as though they had happened to a different person. And this, too, was true.

I had lost a lot of weight. I could visualize myself, pallid and thin. I couldn't even cry, though I felt like it a couple of times. There was something wrong with my tear ducts. It was a dreadful thing that any man should be brought to this.

Then one day there came a light scratching upon the door. I ignored it.

It came again, and still I did not respond.

Then I heard my name whispered, in the interrogative.

I crossed the cell.

"Yes?" I replied.

"It's me, Rein," he said. "How are you?"

I laughed at that.

"Fine! Oh just fine!" I said. "Steak and champagne every night, and dancing girls. God! You should make the scene sometime!"

"I'm sorry," he said, "that there is nothing I can do for you," and I could feel the pain in his voice.

"I know," I said.

"I would if I could," he told me.

"I know that, too."

"I brought you something. Here."

The little gate at the bottom of the cell door creaked slightly as it swung inward several times.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Some clean clothes," he said, "and three loaves of fresh bread, a head of cheese, some beef, two bottles of wine, a carton of cigarettes, and a lot of matches."

My voice caught in my throat.

"Thanks, Rein. You're all right. How did you arrange this?"

"I know the guard who's standing duty this shift. He won't talk. He owes me too much."

"He might try to cancel his debts by squealing," I said. "So don't do it again-much as I appreciate it. Needless to say, I'll dispose of the evidence."

"I wish it had turned out different, Corwin."

"You and me both. Thanks for thinking of me when you were ordered not to."

"That part was easy." he said.

"How long have I been in this place?"

"Four months and ten days," he said.

"So what's new in Amber?"

"Erie reigns. That's all."

"Where's Julian?"

"Back in the Forest of Arden with his guard."

"Why?"

"Some strange things made it through Shadow recently."

"I see. How about Caine?"

"He's still in Amber, enjoying himself. Wenching and drinking, mostly."

"And Gerard?"

"He's admiral of the entire fleet."

I sighed with a bit of relief. I was afraid his withdrawal during the naval engagement might have cost him something with Eric.

"And what of Random?"

"He's up the hall aways."

"What? He was taken?"

"Yes. He walked the Pattern in Rebma and showed up here, with a crossbow. He wounded Eric before he was taken."

"Really? Why wasn't he slain?"

"Well, rumor has it he's married a noblewoman of Rebma. Eric didn't want to court an incident with Rebma at this point. Moire has quite a kingdom, and there is talk that Eric is even considering asking her to be his queen. All gossip, of course. But interesting."

"Yes " I said

"She liked you, didn't she?"

"Somewhat. How did you hear?"

"I was present when Random was sentenced. I got to speak with him for a moment. The Lady Vialle, who claims to be his wife, has asked to join him in prison. Eric is not yet certain how to reply."

I thought upon the blind girl, who I had never met, and I wondered at this.

"How long ago did all this happen?" I asked.

"Mm. Thirty-four days," he replied. "That was when Random showed up. A week later, Vialle made her request."

"She must be a strange woman, If she really loves Random,"

"Those were my sentiments," he replied. "I can't think of a more unusual combination."

"If you should get to see him again, give him my regards and my regrets."

"Yes."

"How fare my sisters?"

"Dierdre and LIewella remain in Rebma. The Lady Florimel has been enjoying Eric's favors and stands high in the present court. I do not know where Fiona is presently."

"Has anything more been heard of Bleys? I am sure that he died."

"He must have died," said Rein, "His body was never recovered, though."

"What of Benedict?"

"As absent as ever."

"How about Brand?"

"No word."

"Then I guess that covers the whole family tree, as it stands at present. Have you written any new ballads?"

"No," he said. "I'm still working on 'The Siege of Amber,' but it will be an underground hit, if at all."

I reached my hand out through the tiny gate at the bottom of the door.

"I would clasp hands with thee," I said, and I felt his hand touch mine.

"It was good of thee to do this thing for me. Don't do it again, though. It would he foolish to risk Eric's wrath."

He squeezed my hand, muttered something, and was gone.

I found his CARE package and stuffed myself with the meat, which was the most perishable item. I ate a lot of the bread. to accompany it, and I realized that I had almost forgotten how good food can taste. Then I grew drowsy and slept. I don't think I slept very long, and when I awoke I opened one of the bottles of wine.

It didn't take as much as usual, in my weakened condition, to get me kind of high. I had a cigarette. sat down on my mattress, leaned back against the wall, and mused.

I remembered Rein as a child. I was already full grown by then and he was a candidate for court jester. A thin, wise kid. People had kidded him too much. Me included. But I wrote music, composed ballads, and he'd picked up a lute somewhere and had taught himself how to use it. Soon we were singing with voices together raised and all like that, and before long I took a liking to him and we worked together. practicing the martial arts. He was lousy at them. But I felt kind of sorry for the way I had treated him earlier, what with the way he had dug my stuff, so I forced the fake graces upon him and also made him a passable saber man. I'd never regretted it, and I guess he didn't either. Before long, he became minstrel to the court of Amber. I had called him my page all that while, and when the wars beckoned, against the dark things out of Shadow called Weirmonken, I made him

my squire, and we had ridden off to the wars together. I knighted him upon the battlefield, at Jones Falls, and he had deserved it. After that, he had gone on to become my better when it came to the ways of words and music. His colors were crimson and his words were golden. I loved him, as one of my two or three friends in Amber. I didn't think he'd take the risk he had to bring me a decent meal, though. I didn't think anyone would. I had another drink and smoked another cigarette, in his name, to celebrate him. He was a good man. I wondered how long he would survive.

I threw all the butts into the head and also-eventually-the empty bottle. I didn't want anything around to show that I had been "enjoying" myself, should a sudden inspection be held. I ate all the good food he had brought me, and I felt surfeited for the first time since I had been in durance. I saved the last bottle for one massive spell of drunkenness and forgetfulness.

And after that time had passed, I returned to my cycle of recriminations.

I hoped, mainly, that Eric had no measure of our complete powers. He was king in Amber, granted, but he didn't know everything. Not yet. Not the way Dad had known. There was a million-in-one shot that might still work in my favor. So much so, and so different that at least it served to grant me my small purchase upon sanity, there in the grip of despair.

But maybe I did go mad for a time, I don't know. There are days that are great blanks to me now, as I stand here on the brink of Chaos. God knows what they held, and I'll never see a shrink to find out.

There are none of you, good doctors, could cope with my family, anyway.

I lay there and I paced there, within the numbing darkness. I grew quite sensitive to sounds. I listened to the scurry of rats' feet through straw, the distant moaning of other prisoners, the echoes of a guard's footsteps as he approached with a tray of food. I began estimating distances and direction from things like this.

I suppose I became more sensitive to odors also, but I tried not to think about them too much. Aside from the imaginable nauseating ones there was, for a long while, what I would swear to be the odor of decaying flesh. I wondered, if I were to die, how long would it be before someone took notice? How many chunks of bread and bowls of slop would go uneaten before the guard thought to check within after my continued existence?

The answer to that one could be very important.

The death odor was around for a long while. I tried to think in terms of time again, and it seemed that it persisted for over a week.

Though I rationed myself carefully, resisting the compulsion, the

handy temptation, for as long as I could, I finally found myself down to my final pack of cigarettes.

I tore it open and lit one. I had had a carton of Salems and I had smoked eleven packs. That was two hundred and twenty cigarettes. I had once timed myself with one, and it had taken me seven minutes to smoke it. That made for a total of one thousand five hundred and forty minutes spent smoking, or twenty-five hours and forty minutes. I was sure I had spent at least an hour between cigarettes, more like an hour and a half. Say an hour and a half. Now figure that I was sleeping six to eight hours per day. That left sixteen to eighteen waking hours. I guessed I was smoking ten or twelve per day. So that meant maybe three weeks had passed since Rein's visit. He had told me it was four months and ten days since the coronation, which meant that it was now around five months.

I nursed my last pack, enjoying each one like a love affair. When they were all gone, I felt depressed.

Then a lot more time must have passed.

I got to wondering about Eric. How was he making out as liege? What problems was he encountering? What was he up to right now? Why hadn't he been around to torment me? Could I ever truly be forgotten in Amber, even by imperial decree? Never, I decided.

And what of my brothers? Why had none of them contacted me? It would be so easy to draw forth my Trump and break Eric's decree. None did, though.

I thought for a long while upon Moire, the last woman I had loved. What was she doing? Did she think of me ever? Probably not. Maybe she was Eric's mistress by now, or his queen. Did she ever speak to him of me? Again. probably not.

And what of my sisters? Forget it. Bitches all, they.

I had been blinded once before, by a cannon flashback in the eighteenth century on the Shadow Earth. But it had only lasted for around a month and my sight had returned. Eric had had a permanent thing in mind, however, when he had given his order. I still perspired and shuddered, and sometimes woke up screaming, whenever memory of the whitehot irons returned to me-hung there before my eyes-and then the contact!

I moaned softly and continued to pace.

There was absolutely nothing I could do. That was the most horrible part of the whole thing. I was as helpless as an embryo. To be born again into sight and fury was a thing for which I would give my soul. Even for an hour, with a blade in my band, to duel once again with my brother.

I lay back on my mat and slept. When I awakened, there was food, and I ate once again and paced. My fingernails and my toenails

had grown long. My beard was very long and my hair fell across my eyes, constantly. I felt filthy, and I itched all the time. I wondered whether I had fleas.

That a prince of Amber could be brought to this state drew a terrible emotion from the center of my being, wherever that may be. I had been reared to think of us as invincible entities, clean and cool and diamond-hard, like our pictures on the Trumps. Obviously, we were not.

At least, we were enough like other men to have our resources.

I played mental games, I told myself stories, I reviewed pleasant memories-there were many of these. I recalled the elements: wind, rain, snow, the summer's warmth, and the spring's cool breezes. I had had a small airplane on the Shadow Earth, and when I flew it I had enjoyed the sensation. I recalled the glistening panoramas of color and distance, the miniaturization of cities, the broad blue sweep of sky, the herds of clouds (where were they now?) and the clean expanse of the ocean beneath my wings. I remembered women I had loved, parties, military engagements. And when all was done, and I could help it no longer, I thought of Amber.

One time, when I did so, my tear glands began to function again. I wept.

After an interminable time, a time filled with blackness and many sleeps, I heard footsteps which paused before the door to my cell, and I heard the sound of a key within the lock.

It was a time so long after Rein's visit that I had forgotten the taste of the wine and the cigarettes. I could not realty estimate its span, but it had been long.

There were two men in the corridor. I could tell this from their footsteps even before I heard the sounds of their voices.

One of the voices I recognized.

The door swung open and Julian said my name.

I didn't answer right away, and he repeated it.

"Corwin? Come here."

Since I didn't have much choice in the matter, I drew myself erect and advanced. I stopped when I knew I was near him.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Come with me." And he took my arm.

We walked along the corridor, and he said nothing and I'd be damned if I'd ask him any questions.

From the echoes, I could tell when we entered the big hall. Soon after, he guided me up the stair.

Up, and into the palace proper we went.

I was taken to a room and seated in a chair. A barber set to work cutting my hair and my beard. I didn't recognize his voice when he

asked me if I wanted the beard trimmed or removed.

"Cut it off," I said, and a manicurist set to work on my nails, all twenty of them.

Then I was bathed, and someone helped me to dress in clean garments. They hung loose on me. I was loused also, but forget that.

Then I was led into another black place filled with music and the odors of good food and the sounds of many voices and some laughter. I recognized it to be the dining room.

The voices subsided a bit as Julian led me in and seated me.

I sat there until the trumpet notes, to which I was forced to rise.

I heard the toast called out:

"To Eric the First, King of Amber! Long live the king!"

I didn't drink to that, but no one seemed to notice. It was Caine's voice that had called out the toast, from far up along the table.

I ate as much as I could, because it was the best meal I had been offered since the coronation. I gathered from conversation overheard that today was the anniversary of Eric's coronation, which meant I had spent an entire year in the dungeons.

No one spoke to me. and I didn't make any overtures. I was present as a ghost only. To humiliate me, and to serve as a reminder to my brothers, no doubt, as to the price of defying our liege. And everyone had been ordered to forget me.

It went on well into the night. Someone kept me well provided with wine, which was something, and I sat there and listened to the music of all the dances.

The tables had been removed by this time, and I was seated off somewhere in a corner.

I got stinking drunk and was half dragged, half carried back to my cell in the morning, when the whole thing was over save for the cleaning up. My only regret was that I hadn't gotten sick enough to dirty the floor or someone's pretty garments.

Thus ended the first year of darkness.

Chapter 9

I shall not bore you with repetition. My second year was pretty much like my first, with the same finale. Ditto for the third. Rein came twice that second year, with a basket of goodies and a mouthful of gossip. Both times I forbade him ever to come again. The third year he came down six times, every other month, and each time I forbade him anew and ate his food and heard what he had to say.

Something was wrong in Amber. Strange things walked through Shadow and presented themselves, with violence, to all and sundry. They were destroyed, of course. Eric was still trying to figure out how they had occurred. I did not mention my curse, though I later rejoiced in the fact that it had come to pass.

Random, like myself, was still a prisoner. His wife had joined him. The positions of my other brothers and sisters remained unchanged. This bolstered me through the third anniversary of the coronation, and it made me feel almost alive again.

It

It! One day it was there, and it made me feel so good that I immediately broke out the final bottle of wine Rein had brought me and opened the last pack of cigarettes, which I had been saving.

I smoked them and sipped and enjoyed the feeling that I had somehow beaten Eric. If he found this out, I felt it might be fatal. But I knew he didn't know.

So I rejoiced, smoking. drinking and reveling in the light of that which had occurred.

Yes, the light.

I'd discovered a tiny patch of brightness, off somewhere to my right.

Well, let's take it like this: I had awakened in a hospital bed and learned that I had recovered all too soon. Dig?

I heal faster than others who have been broken. All the lords and ladies of Amber have something of this capacity.

I'd lived through the Plague, I'd lived through the march on Moscow.

I regenerate faster and better than anybody I've ever known.

Napoleon had once made a remark about it. So had General MacArthur.

With nerve tissue it takes me a bit longer, that's all.

My sight was returning to me, that's what it meant-that lovely patch of brightness, off somewhere to my right.

After a time, I knew that it was the little barren area in the door to my cell.

I had grown new eyes, my fingers told me. It had taken me over three years, but I had done it. It was the million-to-one thing I spoke of earlier, the thing which even Eric could not properly assess, because of the variances of powers among the individual members of the family. I had beaten him to this extent: I had learned that I could grow new eyeballs. I had always known that I could regenerate nerve tissues, given sufficient time. I had been left paraplegic from a spine injury received during the Franco-Prussian wars. After two years, it had gone away. I had had my hope-a wild one, I'll admit-that I could do what I had done then, with my burned-out orbs. And I had been right. They felt intact, and the sight was returning, slowly.

How long till the next anniversary of Eric's coronation? I stopped pacing and my heart beat faster. As soon as someone saw that I'd recovered my eyes, I'd lose them again.

Therefore, I'd have to escape before the four years had passed.

How?

I hadn't thought about it much up to this time, because even if I could figure a way to get out of my cell, I'd never make it out of Amber-or out of the palace, for that matter-without eyes or aid, and neither were available to me.

Now, though. . .

The door of my cell was a big, heavy, brass-bound thing, with only a tiny grille at a height of about five feet for purposes of looking in to see whether I was still alive, if anyone cared. Even if I succeeded in removing it, I could tell that I couldn't reach out far enough to touch the lock. There was a little swinging gate at the bottom of the door, large enough to push my food through and that's about all. The hinges were either on the outside or in between the door and the jamb, I couldn't tell for sure. Either way, I couldn't get at them. There were no windows and no other doors.

It was still almost like being blind, save for that feeble reassuring light through the grille. I knew my sight hadn't returned fully. That was still a long way off. But even if it had, it was nearly pitch dark in there. I knew this because I knew the dungeons under Amber.

I lit a cigarette, paced some more, and assessed my possessions, seeking anything that might be of aid. There was my clothing, my sleeping mat, and all the damp straw I wanted. I also had matches, but I quickly rejected the notion of setting fire to the straw. I doubted anyone would come and open the door if I did. Most likely the guard would come and laugh, if he came at all. I had a spoon I'd picked up at the last banquet. I'd wanted a knife, really, but Julian had caught me trying to lift one and snatched it away. What he didn't know, though, was that that was my second attempt. I already had the spoon tucked inside my boot

So what good was it?

I'd heard these stories of guys digging their way out of cells with the damnedest things-belt buckles (which I didn't have)-etc. But I didn't have time to try the Count of Monte Cristo bit. I needed out in a matter of months, or my new eyes wouldn't mean anything.

The door was mainly wood. Oak. It was bound with four metal strips. One went around it near the top, one near the bottom, right above the gate, and there were two which ran from top to bottom, passing along either side of the foot wide grille. The door opened outward, I knew, and the lock was to my left. My memories told me the door was about two inches thick, and I recalled the approximate position of the lock, which I verified by leaning against the door and feeling the tension at that point. I knew that the door was also barred, but I could worry about that later. I might be able to raise it by sliding the handle of the spoon upward between the door's edge and the jamb.

I knelt on my sleeping mat and with the spoon I traced a box about that area which contained the lock. I worked until my hand was quite sore-maybe a couple of hours. Then I ran my fingernail over the surface of the wood. I hadn't scarred it much, but it was a beginning. I switched the spoon to my left hand and continued until it, began to ache.

I kept hoping that Rein would show up. I was sure I could talk him into giving me his dagger if I really pressed the matter. He didn't put in an appearance, though, so I just kept grinding away.

Day after day I worked, until I was perhaps half an inch into the wood. Each time I'd hear a guard's footsteps I'd move the pallet back to the far wall and lie down on it with my back to the door. When he had passed, I'd resume work. Then I had to stop for a while, as much as I hated to. Even though I had wrapped them in cloth torn from my garments, my hands had blistered and the blisters had broken. and after a time the raw flesh underneath began to bleed. So I took a break to let them heal. I decided to devote the time to planning what I'd do after I got out.

When I'd worked my way far enough through the door, I'd raise the bar. The sound of it falling would probably bring a guard. By then, though, I'd be out. A couple of good kicks would break out the piece I was working on and the lock could stay right where it was if it wanted to. The door would swing open then and I would face the guard. He would be armed and I wouldn't. I'd have to take him.

He might be overconfident, thinking I couldn't see. On the other hand, he might be a bit afraid, if he recalled how I had entered into Amber. Either way he would die and I would then be armed. I gripped my right biceps with my left hand and my fingertips touched. Gods'. I

was emaciated! Whatever, I was of the blood of Amber, and I felt that even in that condition I could take any ordinary man. Maybe I was kidding myself, but I'd have to try it.

Then if I succeeded, with a blade in my hand, nothing could keep me from reaching the Pattern. I'd walk it, and when I made it to the center, I could transport myself to any Shadow world I chose. There I would recuperate, and this time I would not rush things. If it took me a century, I'd have everything letter-perfect before I moved against Amber again. After all, I was technically its liege. Hadn't I crowned myself in the presence of all, before Eric had done the same? I'd make good my claim to the throne!

If only it weren't impossible to walk into Shadow from Amber itself! Then I wouldn't have to fool around with the Pattern. But my Amber is the center of all, and you just don't depart it that easily.

After, say, a month my hands had healed and I was developing large calluses from my scraping activities. I heard a guard's footsteps and removed myself to the far side of the cell. There was a brief creak and my meal was slipped beneath the door. Then there were footsteps again, this time diminishing in the distance.

I returned to the door. Without looking, I knew what was on the tray: a chunk of stale bread. a crock of water, and a piece of cheese if I was lucky. I positioned the mat, knelt on it and felt at the groove. I was about halfway through.

Then I heard the chuckle.

It came from behind me.

I turned, not needing my eyes to tell me that someone else was present. There was a man standing near the left wall, giggling.

"Who is it?" I asked. and my voice sounded strange. I realized then that these were the first words I had spoken in a long while.

"Escape," he said. "Trying to escape." And he chuckled again.

"How did you get in here?"

"Walked," he replied.

"From where? How?"

I struck a match and it hurt my eyes, but I held it.

He was a small man. Tiny, might be an even better word. He was around five feet tall and a hunchback. His hair and beard were as heavy as my own. The only distinguishing features in that great mass of fur were his long, hook nose and ins t black eyes, now squinted against the light.

"Dworkin!" I said.

He chuckled again.

"That's my name. What's yours?"

"Don't you know me, Dworkin?" I struck another match and held it near my face. "Look hard. Forget the beard and the hair. Add a

hundred pounds to my frame. You drew me, in exquisite detail, on several packs of playing cards."

"Corwin," he said at last. "I remember you. Yes."

"I had thought you were dead."

"I'm not, though. See?" and he pirouetted before me.

"How is your father? Have you seen him recently? Did he put you here?"

"Oberon is no more," I replied. "My brother Eric reigns in Amber, and I'm his prisoner."

"Then I have seniority," he told me, "for I am Oberon's prisoner."

"Oh? None of us knew that Dad had locked you up."

I heard him weeping.

"Yes," he said after a time. "He didn't trust me."

"Why not?"

"I told him I'd thought of a way to destroy Amber. I described it to him. and he locked me in"

"That wasn't very nice," I said.

"I know," he agreed, "but he did give me a pretty apartment and lots of things to do research with. Only he stopped coming to visit me after a time. He used to bring men who showed me splotches of ink and made me tell stories about them. That was fun, until I told a story I didn't like and turned the man into a frog. The king was angry when I wouldn't turn him back, and it's been so long since I've seen anybody that I'd even turn him back now, if he still wanted me to. Once-"

"How did you get here, into my cell?" I asked again,

"I told you. I walked."

"Through the wall?"

"Of course not. Through the shadow wall."

"No man can walk through Shadows in Amber. There are no Shadows in Amber."

"Well, I cheated," he admitted.

"How?"

"I designed a new Trump and stepped through it, to see what was on this side of the wall. Oh my!-I just remembered. . . . I can't get back without it. I'll have to make another. Have you got anything to eat? And something to draw with? And something to draw on?"

"Have a piece of bread," I said, and handed It to him, "and here's a piece of cheese to go along with it."

"Thank you, Corwin." and he wolfed them down and drank all my water afterward. "Now, if you'll give me a pen and a piece of parchment, I'll be returning to my own rooms. I want to finish a book I was reading. It's been nice talking to you. Too bad about Eric. I'll stop back again some time and we'll talk some more. If you see your father, please tell him not to he angry with me because I'll-"

"I don't have a pen, or parchment," I observed.

"Goodness," he said, "that's hardly civilized."

"I know. But then, Eric isn't very."

"Well, what have you got? I prefer my own apartment to this place. At least, it's better lighted."

"You have dined with me," I said, "and now I am going to ask you a favor. If you will grant me this request, I promise that I will do everything I can to make things right between you and Dad."

"What is it that you want?" he asked.

"Long have I admired your work," I said, "and there is something I have always desired as a work of your hand. Do you recall the Lighthouse of Cabra?"

"Of course. I've been there many times. I know the keeper, Jopin. I used to play chess with him."

"More than anything else I can think of," I told him, "for most of my adult life. I have longed to see one of your magical sketches of that great gray tower."

"A very simple subject," he said, "and rather an appealing one, at that, I did some preliminary sketches in the past, but I never got beyond that point. Other work kept getting in the way. I'll fetch you one, if you'd like."

"No," I said. "I'd like something more enduring, to keep me company here in my cell-to comfort me, and any others who may later occupy this place."

"Commendable," he said. "What have you in mind as the medium."

"I have a stylus here," I told him (the spoon was fairly sharp by then), "and I'd like to see it traced upon the far wall, so that I might look at it as I take my rest."

He was silent a moment, then, "The illumination is quite poor." he remarked.

"I have several books of matches," I replied. "I'll light them and hold them for you. We might even burn some of this straw if we run low."

"Those are hardly ideal working conditions.

"I know," I said, "and I apologize for them, great Dworkin, but they are the best I have to offer. A work of art by your hand would brighten my humble existence beyond measure."

He chuckled again.

"Very well. But you must promise me that you will provide light afterwards, so that I may sketch myself a way back to my own chambers."

"Agreed." I said. and I felt in my pocket.

I had three full packages of matches and part of a fourth.

I pressed the spoon into his hand and led him to the wall.

"Do you have the feel of the instrument?" I asked him.

"Yes, it's a sharpened spear, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'll make a light as soon as you say you are ready. You'll have to sketch rapidly, because my supply of matches is limited. I'll allot half for the lighthouse and the other half for your own business."

"All right," he said, and I struck a match and he began to trace lines upon the moist gray wall.

First he did an upright rectangle to frame and contain the thing. Then with several deft strokes, the lighthouse began to appear. It was amazing, daft as he was, his skill was intact. I held each match at its barest base, spat on my left thumb and forefinger, and when I could hold it no longer in my right I took hold of the blackened end and inverted it, letting the match burn away completely before I struck another.

When the first book of matches was gone, he had finished the tower and was working on the sea and the sky. I encouraged him, I murmured appreciation at every stroke.

"Great, really great," I said, when it appeared to be almost finished. Then he made me waste another match while he signed it. I was almost through the second book by then.

"Now let's admire it," he said.

"If you want to get back to your own apartments, you'll have to leave the admiring to me." I told him. "We're too low on matches to be art critics at this point."

He pouted a bit, but moved to the other wall and began sketching as soon as I struck a light.

He sketched a tiny study, a skull on the desk, a globe beside it, walls full of books all around.

"Now that's good." he said, when I had finished the third pack and was starting on the remaining partial pack.

It took him six more to finish up and one to sign it. He gazed at it while the eighth match burned-there were only two remaining-then he took a step forward and was gone.

The match was burning my fingertips by then and I dropped it and it sizzled when it hit the straw and went out.

I stood there shaking, full of mixed feelings, and then I heard his voice and felt his presence at my side. He was back again.

"I just thought of something," he said. "How can you see the picture when it's so dark in here?"

"Oh. I can see in the dark," I told him. "I've lived with it so long that it has become my friend."

"I see. I just wondered. Give me a light so I can go back now."

"Very well," I agreed, considering my second to last match. "But

you'd better bring your own illumination next time you stop around, I'll be out of matches after this."

"All right." And I struck a light and he considered his drawing, walked toward it. and vanished once more.

I turned quickly and considered the Lighthouse of Cabra before the match failed. Yes, the power was there. I could feel it.

Would my final match serve me, though?

No, I didn't think it would. A longer period of concentration than that was required for me to use a Trump as a gateway.

What could I burn? The straw was too damp and might not take fire. It would be horrible to have the gateway-my road to freedom-right there with me and not be able to use it.

I needed a flame that would last awhile.

My sleeping roll! It was a cloth liner stuffed with straw. That straw would be drier, and the cloth would burn, too.

I cleared half the floor, down to the bare stone. Then I sought the sharpened spoon. to use to cut the liner. I cursed then. Dworkin had carried it off with him.

I twisted and tore at the thing.

Finally, it came open and I pulled out the dry straw from the middle. I made a little heap of it and I set the liner nearby, to use as extra fuel if I needed it. The less smoke the better, though. It would attract attention if a guard passed this way. This wasn't too likely, though, since I had just recently been fed, and I got one meal a day.

I struck my last match, then used it to set fire to the cardboard book that had contained it. When this got going, I used it on the straw.

It almost didn't take. The straw was damper than I'd thought, even though it came from the center of my mat. But finally there was a glow, and then a flame. It took two of the other empty matchbooks to achieve this, so I was glad I hadn't thrown them down the john.

I tossed on the third, held the liner in my left hand, and stood and faced the drawing.

The glow spread up the wall as the flames danced higher, and I concentrated on the tower and recalled it. I thought I heard the cry of a gull. I sniffed something like a salt breeze, and the place became more real as I stared.

I tossed the liner onto the fire. and the flames subsided for a moment, then sprang higher. I didn't remove my eyes from the drawing as I did this.

The magic was still there, in Dworkin's hand, for soon the lighthouse seemed as real to me as my cell. Then it seemed the only reality, and the cell but a Shadow at my back. I heard the splashing of the waves and felt something like the afternoon sun upon me.

I stepped forward, but my foot did not descend into the fire.

I stood upon the sandy, rock-strewn edge of the small island Cabra, which held the great gray lighthouse that lit a path for the ships of Amber by night. A flock of frightened gulls wheeled and screamed about me, and my laughter was one with the booming of the surf and the free song of the wind. Amber lay forty-three miles behind my left shoulder.

I had escaped.

Chapter 10

I made my way to the lighthouse and climbed the stone stair that led to the door on its western face. It was high, wide, heavy, and watertight. Also, it was locked. There was a small quay about three hundred yards behind me. Two boats were moored at it. One was a rowboat and the other was a sailboat with a cabin. They swayed gently, and beneath the sun and water was mica behind them. I paused for a moment to regard them. It had been so long since I had seen anything that for an instant they seemed more than real, and I caught a sob within my throat and swallowed it.

I turned and knocked on the door.

After what seemed too long a wait, I knocked again.

Finally, I heard a noise within and the door swung open, creaking on its three dark hinges.

Joplin, the keeper, regarded me through bloodshot eyes and I smelled whisky upon his breath. He was about five and a half feet tail and so stooped that he reminded me somewhat of Dworkin. His beard was as long as mine, so of course it seemed longer, and it was the color of smoke, save for a few yellow stains near his dry-looking lips. His skin was as porous as an orange rind and the elements had darkened it to resemble a fine old piece of furniture. His dark eyes squinted, focused. As with many people who are hard of hearing, he spoke rather loudly.

"Who are you? What do you want?" he asked.

If I was that unrecognizable in my emaciated, hairy condition, I decided that I might as well maintain my anonymity.

"I am a traveler from the south and I was shipwrecked recently," I said. "I clung to a piece of wood for many days and was finally washed ashore here. I slept on the beach all morning. It was only recently that I recovered sufficient strength to walk to your lighthouse."

He moved forward and took my arm. He threw his other arm around my shoulders.

"Come in, come in then," he said. "Lean on me. Take it easy. Come this way."

He led me to his quarters, which were extraordinarily messy, being strewn with many old books, charts, maps, and pieces of nautical equipment. He wasn't any too steady himself, so I didn't lean too hard, just enough to maintain the impression of weakness I had tried to convey as I'd leaned against his doorframe.

He led me to a daybed, suggested I lie down, and left to secure the door and fetch me something to eat.

I removed my boots, but my feet were so filthy that I put them

back on again. If I'd been drifting about very long, I wouldn't be dirty. I didn't want to give away my story, so I drew a blanket that was there over me and leaned hack, really resting.

Jopin returned shortly with a pitcher of water, a pitcher of beer, a great slice of beef, and half a loaf of bread upon a square wooden tray. He swept clear the top of a small table, which he then kicked into a position beside the couch. Then he set the tray down on it and bade me eat and drink.

I did. I stuffed myself. I glutted myself. I ate everything in sight. I emptied both pitchers.

Then I felt tremendously tired. Jopin nodded when he saw it come over me, and he told me to go to sleep. Before I knew it, I had.

When I awakened, it was night time and I felt considerably better than I had in many weeks. I got to my feet and retraced my earlier route and departed the building. It was chilly out there, but the sky was crystal clear and there seemed to be a million stars. The lens at the top of the tower blazed at my back, then went dark, blazed, then went dark. The water was cold, but I just had to cleanse myself. I bathed and washed my clothing and wrung it out. I must have spent an hour doing that. Then I went back to the lighthouse, hung my clothes over the back of an old chair to dry out, crawled beneath the blanket, slept again.

In the morning, when I awoke, Jopin was already up. He prepared me a hearty breakfast, and I treated it the same way as I had the dinner of the previous evening. Then I borrowed a razor, a mirror, and a pair of scissors and gave myself a shave and a sort of haircut. I bathed again afterward, and when I donned my salty, stiff, clean garments I felt almost human again.

Jopin stared at me when I returned from the sea and said, "You look kinda familiar, fella," and I shrugged.

"Now tell me about your wreck."

So I did. Out of whole cloth. What a disaster I detailed! Down to the snapping of the mainmast, yet.

He patted me on the shoulder and poured me a drink. He lit the cigar he had given me.

"You just rest easy here," he told me. "I'll take you ashore any time you like, or I'll signal you a passing ship if you see one you recognize."

I took him up on his offered hospitality. It was too much of a lifesaver not to. I ate his food and drank his drinks and let him give me a clean shirt which was too big for him. It had belonged to a friend of his who'd drowned at sea.

I stayed with him for three months, as I recovered my strength. I helped him around the place-tending the light on nights when he felt like getting smashed, and cleaning up all the rooms in the house-even

to the extent of painting two of them and replacing five cracked windowpanes-and watching the sea with him on stormy nights.

He was apolitical, I learned. He didn't care who reigned in Amber. So far as he was concerned, the whole bloody crew of us were rotten. So long as he could tend his lighthouse and eat and drink of good food and brew, and consider his nautical charts in peace, he didn't give half a damn what happened ashore. I came to be rather fond of him, and since I knew something of old charts and maps also, we spent many a good evening correcting a few. I had sailed far into the north many years ago, and I gave him a new chart based on my recollections of the voyage. This seemed to please him immensely, as did my description of those waters.

"Corey" (that was how I'd named myself), "I'd like to sail with you one day," he said. "I hadn't realized you were skipper of your own vessel one time."

"Who knows?" I told him. "You were once a captain yourself, weren't you?"

"How'd you know?" he asked.

Actually, I'd remembered, but I gestured about me in reply.

"All these things you've collected," I said, "and your fondness for the charts, Also, you bear yourself like a man who once held a command."

He smiled.

"Yes," he told me, "that's true. I had a command for over a hundred years. That seems long ago. . . Let's have another drink."

I sipped mine and sort of put it aside. I must have gained over forty pounds in the months I had spent with him. Any day now, I was expecting him to recognize me as a member of the family. Maybe he would turn me in to Eric if he did-and maybe not. Now that we'd established this much of camaraderie, I had a feeling that he might not do it. I didn't want to take the chance and find out.

Sometimes as I sat tending the light I wondered, "How long should I stay here?"

Not too much longer, I decided, adding a drop of grease to a swivel bearing. Not much longer at all. The time was drawing near when I should take to the road and walk among Shadows once again.

Then one day I felt the pressure, gentle and questing at first. I couldn't tell for sure who it was.

I immediately stood stock still, closed my eyes and made my mind go blank. It was about five minutes before the questing presence withdrew.

I paced then and wondered, and I smiled when I realized the shortness of my course. Unconsciously, I had been pacing out the dimensions of my cell back in Amber.

Someone had just tried to reach me, via my Trump. Was it Eric? Had he finally become aware of my absence and decided to try locating me in this manner? I wasn't sure. I felt that he might fear mental contact with me again. Julian, then? Or Gerard? Caine? Whoever it had been, I had closed him out completely, I knew that. And I would refuse such contact with any of my family. I might be missing some important news or a helpful call, but I couldn't afford to take the chance. The attempted contact and my blocking efforts left me with a chill. I shuddered. I thought about the thing all the rest of the day and decided that the time had come for me to move on. It wouldn't do for me to remain this close to Amber while I was so vulnerable. I had recovered sufficiently to make my way among Shadows, to seek for the place where I had to go if Amber were ever to be mine. I had been lulled into something close to peace by old Jopin's ministrations. It would be a pain to leave him, for in the months of our association I had come to like the old guy. so that evening, after we'd finished a game of chess, I told him of my plans to depart.

He poured us two drinks then raised his and said, "Good luck to you, Corwin. I hope to see you again one day."

I didn't question the fact that he had called me by my proper name, and he smiled as he realized that I hadn't let it slip by.

"You've been all right, Jopin," I told him. "If I should succeed in what I'm about to try, I won't forget what you did for me."

He shook his head.

"I don't want anything," he said. "I'm happy right where I am, doing exactly what I'm doing. I enjoy running this damned tower. It's my whole life. If you should succeed in whatever you're about-no, don't tell me about it, please! I don't want to know!-I'll be hoping you'll stop around for a game of chess sometime."

"I will," I promised.

"You can take the Butterfly in the morning, if you'd like."

"Thanks."

The Butterfly was his sailboat.

"Before you go," he said, "I suggest you take my spyglass, climb the tower, and look back on the Vale of Garnath."

"What's there to see?"

He shrugged.

"You'll have to make up your own mind about that"

I nodded.

"Okay, I will."

We then proceeded to get pleasantly high and turned in for the night. I'd miss old Jopin. With the exception of Rein, he was the only friend I'd found since my return. I wondered vaguely about the valley

which had been a sheet of flame the last time I had crossed it. What could it be that was so unusual about it now, these four years later?

Troubled by dreams of werewolves and Sabbats, I slept, and the full moon rose above the world.

At the crack of dawn I did the same. Jopin was still sleeping, which was good, because I don't really like to say good-by, and I had a funny feeling that I would never see him again.

I climbed the tower to the room that housed the big light, spyglass at my side. I moved to the window facing the shore and focused on the valley.

There was a mist hanging above the wood. It was a cold, gray, wet-looking thing that clung to the tops of the small, gnarly trees. The trees were dark, and their branches twisted together like the fingers of wrestling hands. Dark things darted among them, and from the patterns of their fight I knew they were not birds. Bats. probably. There was something evil present in that great wood, I knew, and then I recognized it. It was myself.

I had done this thing with my curse. I had transformed the peaceful Valley of Garnath into what it now represented: it was a symbol of my hate for Eric and for all those others who had stood by and let him get away with his power grab, let him blind me. I didn't like the looks of that forest, and as I stared at it I realized how my hate had objectified itself. I knew it because it was a part of me.

I had created a new entranceway into the real world. Garnath was now a pathway through Shadows. Shadows dark and grim. Only the dangerous, the malicious might walk that pathway. This was the source of the things Rein had mentioned, the things that troubled Eric. Good-in a way-if they kept him occupied. But as I swung the glass, I couldn't escape the feeling that I had done a very bad thing indeed. At the time, I'd had no idea that I'd ever see the light of day's bright skies again. Now that I did, I realized that I'd unleashed a thing that would take an awful lot of undoing. Even now, strange shapes seemed to move within that place. I had done a thing which had never been done before, not during the whole of Oberon's reign: I had opened a new way to Amber. And I had opened it only to the worst. A day would come when the liege of Amber-whoever he might he-would be faced with the problem of closing that dreadful way. I knew this as I stared, realizing the thing to be a product of my own pain, anger, and hate. If I won out in Amber one day, I might have to cope with my own handiwork, which is always a devilish thing to attempt. I lowered the glass and sighed.

So be it, I decided. In the meantime, it would give Eric something to have insomnia over.

I grabbed a quick bite to eat, outfitted the Butterfly as rapidly as I

could, hoisted some canvas, cast off, and set sail. Jopin was usually up by that hour, but maybe he didn't like good-bys either.

I headed her out to sea, knowing where I was going but not real certain how to get there. I'd be sailing through Shadow and strange waters, but it would be better than the overland route, what with my handiwork abroad in the realm.

I had set sail for a land near as sparkling as Amber itself, an almost immortal place, a place that did not really exist, not any longer. It was a place which had vanished into Chaos ages ago, but of which a Shadow must somewhere survive. All I had to do was find it, recognize it, and make it mine once again, as it had been in days long gone by. Then, with my own forces to back me up, I would do another thing Amber had never known. I didn't know how yet, but I promised myself that guns would blaze within the immortal city on the day of my return.

As I sailed into Shadow, a white bird of my desire came and sat upon my right shoulder. and I wrote a note and tied It to its leg and sent It on Its way. The note said, "I am coming," and it was signed by me.

I would never rest until I held vengeance and the throne within my hand, and good night sweet prince to anybody who stood between me and these things.

The sun hung low on my left and the winds bellied the sails and propelled me onward. I cursed once and then laughed.

I was free and I was running. but I had made it this far. I now had the chance I'd wanted all along.

A black bird of my desire came and sat on my left shoulder, and I wrote a note and tied it to its leg and sent it off into the west.

It said, "Eric-I'll be back," and it was signed: "Corwin, Lord of Amber."

A demon wind propelled me east of the sun.

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